

THE JOY OF THE LORD IS OUR STRENGTH:
CULTIVATING THE POWER OF JOY TO TRANSFORM, LIBERATE, RESIST

A Practical Research Project
presented to
the Faculty of
Claremont School of Theology

in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by Patricia Susanne McCaughan

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This professional project completed by

PATRICIA SUSANNE MCCAUGHAN

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Faculty Committee

Rev. Dr. Karen Dalton, Chairperson

Dean of the Faculty

Rev. Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook

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ABSTRACT

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by

Patricia Susanne McCaughan

This project is an experiment in joy. It explores what happened when a small, struggling congregation intentionally cultivated joy. The project examines the question from a variety of theological and faith contexts. These include historical, biblical, and contemporary, personal narratives and lived experiences.

Theologians and neuroscientists alike have said that one of the most powerful relational experiences is shared joy, and that the mission of the church is inextricably linked with joy. The more that joy is shared among us, the more it amplifies and reproduces. We wondered whether cultivating joy could become an antidote to the challenges experienced by many mainline Protestant congregations. Such challenges include, but are not limited to, declining and/or aging population, changing ethnic demographics, deteriorating campuses, overwhelming debt, and lingering broken trust.

The project employed a variety of ways to transmit joy—through visual, electronic and written media. An initial survey was administered to take the congregation's "joy pulse." This resulted in profound conversations, leading to an explosion of creativity expressed in the physical transformation of the campus. As the project engendered an expansiveness of vision, it heightened awareness, deepened relationships among the congregation, and created a new

campus community. The power of story became clear—both individually and collectively—creating bridges of understanding among the church and its larger community. These efforts culminated with the church hosting a community-wide interfaith Festival of Joy. The result is that more and more we are surprised and renewed by joy.

The hope is that this project could serve as a palette for other struggling churches and challenged congregations to begin to create—in their own unique contexts—a beautiful, strong self-portrait that sustains, transforms, and liberates while resisting anything other than the joy of the Lord.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Donald and Madge McCaughan, lovers of knowledge, who believed passionately in the power of education to transform lives.

To my sister Linda and niece Jennifer; their memories will always light my life.

To my sisters, Nancy, Janice and Carolyn, strength in time of need.

To my husband and best friend, Keith Yamamoto, God's gift.

Introduction

The word of God sparked the Joy Project 2019 at St. George's Episcopal Church, in Laguna Hills, where I have served as vicar for five years. It was January 27, the third Sunday after the Epiphany and our reading was from the Book of Nehemiah. The prophet spoke through the centuries directly to our hearts as he comforted the ancient Israelites. Seeking restoration and renewal after years of exile, standing six hours in the town square, they felt the power and force of God's word. They remembered themselves as God's beloved, and they recognized not only their need for God but also God's need for them. And they wept.

Nehemiah comforted them by saying, "Go your way. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."¹

On that day, we, too, felt their power and force of Nehemiah's words. We adapted them for our annual meeting theme the following Sunday and also for the entire year: "The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength."

From that moment on, we clamored for joy. And it happened. We grew curious. What exactly is this joy of the Lord? What do the Bible, the church, and we know of it for that matter? How will we know it? How do we find it? And what does it look like—especially at St. George's, a small, struggling congregation, threatened by a freeway expansion, decades of deferred maintenance, crushing debt, and a history of broken trust?

The Holy Spirit urged us on to an adventure of discovery. We began to experiment, dare greatly, live joyously, open our hearts and our eyes and our minds. And we experienced it—in our regular worship, in our hearts, and through sharing the stories of our people, past and present. This joy helped us to open doors, restore minds, rejuvenate hearts, and recover a vision. We

¹ Nehemiah 8:10 (NRSV).

began to recognize it among the guests who visit our campus weekly for healing, recovery, and enrichment.

Along the way, we remembered ourselves again as God's beloved. We learned that, for some of us, belovedness meant faithfulness, which prompted consideration of how to share our joy to the world. For others, it meant renewing our vision through the lens of our baptismal covenant and embodying the fruits of the Spirit, especially seeking joy.

We recognized our need for God and claimed God's need for us. We reached more deeply inside ourselves and also more fully and broadly outside ourselves. We created new connections and resisted former unhelpful behaviors. We opened our arms to transformation and learned to cultivate joy. And we learned, as the old spiritual says, to lean on the everlasting arms.²

Barbara A. Holmes captures the moment that sparked the Joy Project beautifully when she describes the opportunity that every Sunday offers for transformation. "In this ordinary Sunday service, something has happened, and we are changed," writes Holmes. "The worldly resistance to transcendence that we wore into the sanctuary has cracked open, and the contemplative moment carries us toward the very source of our being."³

These are "genesis moments," according to artist and author Makoto Fujimura. They lead to many more generative moments, from which emerge

something new, transformed from its source, something that is both free and responsible to make its own ongoing creative contribution [...] open to questions of meaning, reaching beyond mere survival, inspiring people to meaningful action, and leading toward wholeness and harmony.⁴

² Anthony Showalter and Elisha Hoffman, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," in *The Glad Evangel for Revival, Camp and Evangelistic Meetings* (Dalton, Georgia: A.J. Showalter & Company, 1887).

³ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable, Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), ix.

⁴ Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 17.

This project describes the pursuit and cultivation of joy and what happened when the people of St. George's Episcopal Church, in Laguna Hills, California, dedicated 2019 as a year to intentionally live it.

Section I: Transformation

Chapter One: Joy Happens. This chapter will introduce project, the author's experience of joy and the power of story to transform lives and to begin to change systems.

Chapter Two: The Word of God. This chapter will review the author's search for joy in Scripture. It will describe how the liberating power of the Word of God and the stories of God's people become our story.

Chapter Three: Story Sparks Change. This chapter discusses how sharing stories ushers in transformation among individuals and can help change institutional systems.

Section II: Liberation

Chapter Four: Daring Greatly—St. George's Story. This chapter will recall St. George's daring beginnings and our effort to reclaim those roots.

Chapter Five: Living Joyously—A Campus Project. This chapter will describe how joy changed the St. George's campus physically and facilitated a deepened community.

Chapter Six: The Joy of the Lord. This chapter will examine survey results—our attempt to find the pulse of joy at St. George's—and discuss what we learned.

Section III: Resistance

Chapter Seven: Signifying Lives—St. George's Voices. This chapter includes the voices of many of St. George's lay leaders, their definitions of joy and how those understandings have influenced their lives and, by extension, St. George's.

Chapter Eight: A Freeway Project. This chapter describes how a planned freeway project threatened St. George's existence and sharpened our focus on joy.

Chapter Nine: Open Hearts, Deep Community. This chapter will explore more fully what happens when joy opens hearts and eyes, changes perspectives, and turns challenges into opportunities.

Conclusion: Celebration and Postscript. This chapter will reflect on what happens when a community begins to try to live an ethic of joy. It will share what we've learned and where we go from here.

Appendix 1: A copy of the questionnaire given to parishioners.

Appendix 2: A copy of the Joy Journal by Ingrid Fetell Lee, used with permission.

Bibliography

Figures

Section I: Transformation

Chapter 1 – Joy Happens

“There is a difference between happiness and joy.
Joy requires no choice. Joy happens.
Happiness may be a choice;
but I think joy is a gift from God.”

—The Rev. David Marshall
*Former priest-in-charge
St. John’s Episcopal Church,
Chula Vista, California*

Joy happened to me suddenly and unexpectedly, late one night, many years ago. I was a newspaper reporter in Detroit, my hometown. I was returning to my apartment after a very full and invigorating day of reporting and writing breaking news stories.

Because of the late hour, there were no parking spaces available near my apartment building. I fumbled for my keys as I walked the several blocks' distance toward home. Distracted by the day and personal concerns, I wasn't very aware of my surroundings—until I was confronted by a man with a gun.

Suddenly, all my attention was focused on the barrel, aimed directly at my heart. My assailant demanded my wallet, purse, and jewelry. All the material possessions I had previously coveted were suddenly rendered meaningless. I looked into his eyes, hoping to see a sense of life, some sign of mercy, a recognition of my humanity. There was none. Instead, I saw violence and a sense of death. I was certain of one thing only. I felt in my heart and my soul—in a way I cannot explain—that this man wanted to and also intended to take my life.

A prayer sprang instantly from my soul. It wasn't a conscious prayer in the sense of the act of thinking the words and intentionally praying them. I didn't speak them aloud. But I remember them to this day: "Please God, if you just let me live, I will do whatever you ask of me."

And at that moment, my would-be assailant stopped.

The arm that held the gun dropped limply to his side. It seemed as if its weight was suddenly too heavy for him to hold pointed at me. I could almost sense the energy like a dark cloud leaving his body. He appeared exhausted. This man, who may have been on drugs or mentally ill, or simply desperate, was speaking aloud to someone I could not see, someone he believed was talking to him in response.

"I know man, I know," he kept repeating aloud, wincing as if the sounds he alone heard were almost too much to bear. And then, he just walked away from me. To this day, I cannot explain what

happened that night, except that I lived to tell the story. Also, I knew somehow that story was part of a journey I was meant to share with others, and so I am.

Once safely inside my apartment, I was unable to sleep. Stunned, I sat awake the entire night, tearful, wondering what had just happened. What did it mean? Why had it happened to me? Why was I so blessed? God had given me this gift, but for what purpose?

My life suddenly shifted into clear focus. It was as if the veil between heaven and earth had lifted for just a moment. I had known myself to be held, beloved, and spared for a higher calling. I felt grateful to be alive. But I realized, that this newfound sense of myself extended beyond gratitude, to something deeper. I had experienced a presence so powerful in my life that I felt compelled to respond to it. I emerged from that night transformed and convinced that God had spared me for some higher purpose. That conviction helped me summon the courage to respond to a long-ignored sense of call to ordination. In responding, I felt liberated. I have returned to the memory of that night many times for sustenance and strength. Over time, I have realized that in spite of the challenging circumstances the situation presented, my initial gratefulness at being alive had uncovered a deeper, lasting joy connected to the awareness of God's presence in my life.

There is a distinct connection between joy and gratitude, according to Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work. She and others, like Roman Catholic Brother David Steindl-Rast, have said that gratitude opens the door to joy.⁵ In an Internet post, Brown said that discovering this link was a surprise. "In my 12 years of research on 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful, who also did not actively practice

⁵ David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer, an Approach to Life in Fullness* (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1984), 7.

gratitude.”⁶

This understanding was counterintuitive, according to Brown. “I went into the research thinking that the relationship between joy and gratitude was, if you are joyful, you should be grateful.” Instead, she discovered that maintaining a spiritual practice of being grateful, was necessary for sustaining gratitude and joy. For example, she believes keeping a joy-focused journal had changed her life.⁷

My encounter with the gunman did evoke a sense of gratefulness that my life had been spared. But emerging from that encounter was a deeper awareness. Marianne Meye Thompson has described it as “joy because of.”⁸ By this she means that the realization of the mere presence of God evokes joy.

This exchange is reminiscent of the biblical story of Moses who, distracted away from his daily routine to explore the burning bush, is forever transformed.⁹ His transformation subsequently enables the transformation of others. This “joy because of” is evoked purely by God’s presence breaking into our lives and is expressed in a series of calls and responses. For example, God’s joy calls creation into being. Creation responds joyfully. God responds in joy to creation’s response. Connections and relationships deepen and continue to grow, and transformation happens.

Thompson distinguishes this “joy because of” from “joy notwithstanding.”¹⁰ I believe the two are linked. “Joy notwithstanding” is present even in the direst of circumstances. The New Testament account of a teenaged Mary exemplifies this experience. She has received perhaps the worst news any young woman of her time could hear—that she is pregnant and unwed. Yet, something in her encounter with the angel Gabriel is so powerful that a song of joy and liberation bursts forth from her. She

⁶ Brené Brown, “Brené Brown on Joy and Gratitude,” Global Leadership Network (November 21, 2018), accessed February 9, 2020, <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/>.

⁷ Brown, “Joy and Gratitude.”

⁸ Marianne Meye Thompson, “Reflections on Joy in the Bible,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing, Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 29.

⁹ Exodus 3:1-6 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Thompson, “Reflections,” 29.

responds to God's call with words reminiscent of God's own in creation: "Let it be ..."¹¹

The Book of Psalms also sings of joy in creation—in the heavens, nature, wilderness, pastures, hills, meadows, valleys¹² and mountains.¹³ Joy and praise erupt in God's presence.¹⁴ For the people too, God's presence brings fullness of joy.¹⁵ This then evokes satisfaction and praise offered with joyful lips,¹⁶ acts as a beacon and guide,¹⁷ and prompts a response: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises."¹⁸ Charles Mathewes describes these moments as "joy in excess, an excess beyond the self." It is like the awareness of the prodigal son who awakens to a new reality amid the swine and returns to his home. Mathewes believes such joy is

a sacramental state: in creation prompted ultimately by something beyond and before creation, a reality simultaneously speaking of immediacy and transcendence, something done to you yet something you manifest, express, realize, and participate in.¹⁹

Ingrid Fetell Lee describes such joy as a sign of vibrant life. She considers this joy a means of resistance to repressive systems, a form of energy for change. "While communal joy represents an outright danger to a repressive regime, individual joy can also empower resistance. One of the ways it does this is by affirming our humanity," she writes.²⁰

¹¹ Luke 1:38 (NRSV).

¹² Psalms 65:11-13; 95:11-13 (NRSV).

¹³ Psalms 89:12 (NRSV).

¹⁴ Psalms 16:11; 21:6; 66:1; 71:23; 84:1-2 (NRSV).

¹⁵ Psalms 21:6 (NRSV).

¹⁶ Psalms 63:5 (NRSV).

¹⁷ Psalms 16:11 (NRSV).

¹⁸ Psalms 98:4 (NRSV).

¹⁹ Charles Mathewes, "Toward a Theology of Joy," in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, ed. Mirsolav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 67.

²⁰ Ingrid Fetell Lee, "Joy is an Act of Resistance: How Celebration Sustains Activism," *The Aesthetics of Joy* (November 8, 2019), accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.aestheticsofjoy.com/2019/11/joy-is-an-act-of-resistance-how-celebration-sustains-activism/>.

Similarly, Roman Catholic priest Gustavo Gutierrez says that, while these moments liberate us, they also implicate us in God's saving action in history and convey implicit responsibility. According to Gutierrez: "Our service of others must be wrapped in this joy."²¹

My encounter with the gunman didn't trigger images of my past. My life didn't flash before my eyes. Instead, it engendered a deeper awareness of God's presence, one which is always with us. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has described this as God's glory, "pulsing just beneath the surface of all things, with power to transfigure the darkest of our days."²²

This transfiguration ushers in transformation, something that Fujimura calls "a genesis moment," leading to new life, new possibility.²³ Others have had similar experiences. For example, C.S. Lewis describes, in *Surprised by Joy*, his own call and response to joy as a genesis moment of the "clearest consciousness," involving freedom of choice. "I could open the door or keep it shut," he recalls. "I say I 'chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite."²⁴ He adds that God's presence meant for him, as for me, "total surrender, the absolute leap in the dark [...] Now, the demand was simply, all."²⁵

Joy was not a choice, but a gift to me, a call from God. And my spontaneous response was, as Lewis says, simply my life, my all. Such moments are everlasting, to be returned to again and again for sustenance and deepening love for God. "As people deepen in their love for God and others, they become ever more open," writes Gerald May in *The Awakened Heart*. They become, "not only more appreciative of the beauty and joys of life, but also more vulnerable to its pain

²¹ Daniel Hartnett, "Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez," *America Magazine* (February 3, 2003), accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2003/02/03/remembering-poor-interview-gustavo-gutierrez>.

²² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), 7.

²³ Fujimura, *Culture Care*, 17.

²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 274.

²⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 279.

and brokenness.”²⁶

Such joy is liberating and revolutionary because life’s pain cannot cancel it out, according to theologian Doris Donnelly, of John Carroll University. “In the midst of affliction, joy gives proof of its power,” she says.²⁷

Perhaps this explains the emotion felt by a friend of mine at her son’s death. He had suffered with addiction and mental health challenges for many years before succumbing to cancer. Steeped in great sorrow, my friend was hugely surprised to experience something that felt altogether different. This feeling emerged out of her faith. Incredulously, she said, “It was joy.”²⁸

Donnelly clarifies this sense that “joy is not jollity,” that

[it] does not guarantee that we will be the life of the party. It is much more like an anchor that gives us the stability we need to endure all kinds of upsets and struggles and delights with an equanimity and inner peace that no storm can shake. Because joy has its source beyond our earthly calculations, it is and always will be indestructible.²⁹

I experienced my brush with death as a call from God. Jacob had wrestled all night with the angel, but it felt as though I had wrestled with God’s call to me for many years. It had felt inconceivable that God could need me for any purpose. This experience of joy gave me the courage to re-examine my life and the strength to face a truth I had avoided for many years, that God was, indeed, calling me to ordination.

Strengthened by Joy

²⁶ Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart, Opening Yourself to the Love You Need* (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 102, <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B0020Q3FT0>.

²⁷ Doris Donnelly, “Joy: The Delight of Longing,” *The Living Pulpit* 5, no. 4 (1996): 6.

²⁸ Anonymous, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, November 20, 2019, Claremont, California.

²⁹ Donnelly, “Joy: The Delight of Longing,” 6.

My first sense of a call to ordination came when I was eight years old. In church one Sunday morning, I literally *saw* myself wearing a priest's collar. For numerous reasons, I dismissed the notion outright. The realities of my 1960s African American church, home, and school collectively obscured that image.

If, as Black Liberation Theology founder James Cone has said, all theology starts with the particularity of the theologian's experience,³⁰ then my formative years offered a world of mixed messages between the culture and my faith. I heard all of the following contradictions:

- Life is hard, but God loves you.
- No one will help you, but Jesus died for you.
- You will have to work twice as hard to get half as much, but serve the Lord with joy.
- You cannot make a mistake, you will bring shame to the entire race, but all is forgiven.
- Never let down your guard or depend on anyone, but trust in the Lord with all your heart.
- Always have a back-up plan, but God's will be done.

We were also taught the overriding value of upward mobility of working hard and getting a good education. A college degree was considered the one thing the repressive culture around us would not be able to take away.

I grew up at St. Matthew's, one of the historically Black congregations of the Episcopal Church, a former stop on the Underground Railroad. The church's founders surreptitiously aided runaway slaves,

³⁰ Elizabeth Palmer, "James Cone's theology is easy to like and hard to live," *The Christian Century*, May 2, 2018, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/cover-cover/james-cones-theology-easy-and-hard-live>.

by rowing them across the Detroit River to freedom in Canada.

My early years in my hometown of Detroit were filled with other incongruencies. Daily, at school, we placed hands over our hearts as instructed and pledged allegiance to a flag and to “one nation indivisible, under God, with liberty and justice for all.”³¹ And yet we went home each day to newscasts of police attacking civil rights marchers with fire hoses and dogs. We easily deciphered our parents’ code-talk over the dinner table as they described unpleasant encounters with members of “the other club.”

We also experienced the joy notwithstanding “that looks forward in hope, anticipating the action of God to remove all affliction and tribulation.”³² This future-looking hope was grounded in the strength of those early founders of St. Matthews, and my own ancestors who also had escaped slavery for liberation in Canada. At St. Matthew’s, our lives were filled with great joy, cultivated in community. I called it the “church after church,” when the church ladies bustled around the kitchen, doling out mother wisdom and life lessons to us along with the ginger snaps and fruit punch.

St. Matthew’s was a paradoxical world. There, my male cousin, a year older, could serve as an acolyte, but I was not allowed to. At St. Matthew’s, our priest preached about God’s mercy and kindness, but refused some people communion at the altar rail. Once, he stopped a Sunday morning worship service to demand a young mother take her infant daughter out because the child’s head wasn’t covered. Yet, the presence of God was palpable. And I experienced a sense of the “deep joy that seems often tinged with spiritual force,” which Mary Clark Moschella describes in her essay, “Calling and Compassion.”

My early church experiences were filled with an awareness of inequality that was entwined with

³¹ Francis Bellamy, “The Pledge of Allegiance,” History Documents, accessed November 21, 2019, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

³² Thompson, “Reflections on Joy in the Bible,” 29.

deep joy and spiritual force. St. Matthew's was where I first experienced a sense of vocation. I was eight years old, wedged between my sisters on the church's hard, wooden pew, and feeling enthralled by the sermon. My life changed forever at the sight of myself, wearing the same kind of priestly collar Father Meyers wore. I was confused, and puzzled. Yet, the image conveyed a sense of joy that, as Moschella describes, is a gift from God. Like my encounter with the gunman, that moment connected me to God in a way that was larger than myself, a way I could not quite fathom, a way that healed and held me.³³

That moment was the beginning of many experiences in which I felt called by God to serve. I had never seen a woman priest. Women would not be ordained in the Episcopal Church until 1976. Yet I was unable to forget that moment. It was seared into my soul. Years later, when I was a seminary student, I told that story to a priest I knew. He was incredulous: "How could you think to be ordained when you had never seen a woman priest?" I told him that I didn't think it. I *saw* it.

Another moment that brought an intense sense of call happened in 1967, with the Detroit riots. One moment our entire neighborhood was enjoying a sleepy July day, with children playing outside, neighbors talking over their fences, people sitting on their porches. The next moment, trucks filled with National Guard troops were moving along the street, yelling epithets at us, with bayonets fixed to their rifles. What had been a peaceful Sunday suddenly turned into fear and devastation. Next, we heard a low, rumbling noise that blocked out all other sounds of the birds, insects, and laughter. We watched, frozen, as a U.S. Army tank lumbered down our street. Uncertainty and fear gripped us all. We ran for our lives. We spent the next hours, with our faces pressed against the cool tile of our basement floor, cowering, as the tank shot at a house down the street.

The next day, with no news reports readily available to satisfy our need for explanation, there

³³ Mary Clark Moschella, "Calling and Compassion: Elements of Joy in Lived Practices of Care," in *Joy and Human Flourishing, Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 103.

were overriding and troubling questions: If the government is using tanks, and they are shooting in our neighborhood, does this make us the enemy? If we had all been killed, would anyone ever know what had really happened to us?

That was the day I decided to become a journalist. I realized that, if we wanted our story to be told, it was up to us to do it. So I became a journalist. Years later, a colleague who was white described an entirely different experience of the riots. He lived in the suburbs and his parents had told him the riots meant that we—all the black children from the city—were coming into the suburbs to kill him.

Joy Notwithstanding

My experience of the riot was complicated, yet it also brought a sense of the “joy notwithstanding,” which Moschella describes:

[It is a] sense of freedom and delight in the conviction that one is called to a particular people or place, and that one is answering that call, fulfilling his or her purpose. The delight seems to come [...] not from pride in great accomplishments, but from the actual engagement in the work, involving the exercise of talents and the freedom to “step out” from stasis into understanding the worlds of others, particularly others who live on the social, economic, or political margins of life.³⁴

That sense of fulfilling one’s precise calling, especially when it is linked to a belief that one is increasing the greater good, she says, is what brings about a deeper sense of purpose that we might call joy.³⁵

For me, gratitude and joy were intermingled in this instance, through this sense of deeper purpose. It intensified a feeling that God was with me, had been with me, all the days of my life.

Eventually, the belief that God had saved me gave me courage. The feeling never left me that there was still something *more*, another purpose for which God was calling me. Finally, I realized that I could not live my whole life without exploring whatever God wanted or needed from me. At one point,

³⁴ Moschella, “Calling and Compassion,” 118.

³⁵ Moschella, “Calling and Compassion,” 120.

frustrated, I angrily prayed to understand *why* God was calling me: “Just tell me, and I’ll do it, and get on with the rest of my life.” And then I realized, that answering God’s call would *be* the rest of my life.

That realization led me to become involved in lay ministries, in particular a homeless ministry at my church. Serving there brought many awesome experiences of joy and a sense of God’s presence. Eventually, I did attend seminary. When I left Detroit for seminary, I fully expected to return and to resume serving in that homeless ministry, which I loved. I had felt strongly called to the community I knew—inner city Detroit, which was economically depressed and predominantly African American.

Surprisingly, God called me instead, to California. Amazingly, I experienced the strongest call imaginable, to a congregation that represented just the opposite. St. George’s is a primarily Anglo, aging, upper-middle class congregation, with many challenges. I have felt great joy at serving the people of St. George’s and began to explore ways to cultivate joyfulness in them.

Chapter 2 – The Word of God

“The old meeting house caught on fire. The spirit was there.
Every heart was beating in unison as we turned our minds
to God to tell him of our sorrows here below. God saw our need
and came to us. I used to wonder what made people shout, but
now I don’t. There is a joy on the inside, and it wells up so strong
that we can’t keep still. It is fire in the bones. Any time that fire
touches a man, he will jump.”

—An Unnamed Slave
*God Struck Me Dead:
Voices of Ex-Slaves*

My personal and pastoral experiences have inspired a search to understand what joy is, by studying how it is regarded in the Bible and what the church teaches about it. That search has also included listening to the voices of others who have shared their personal encounters with joy. The St. George's Joy Project also tackled this search, asking many of the same questions, such as: What is joy? What does the Bible say about it? How do theologians and the church understand it? What do we know of it ourselves? And, is it possible to cultivate joy?

As a result of my exploration, I believe that joy—or joyous living—is much more than happiness. Joy is more robust and gritty, tough but tender-hearted, and even daring. Joy is a way of being, while happiness is fleeting and dependent upon circumstance. Joy sustains us, in sadness and through life's challenges. "I can feel someone else's pain, or my own, and still have a life of joy," says Paul Born, in *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*.³⁶

Born adds that a life of joy implies compassion, service and relationship. He says that it is nurtured through

kindness, love, and compassion, and it evokes in us altruism, caring and the desire to end suffering [...] as we enter into community with others. Deepening community is the gateway to a joyful life. And joy is the gateway into caring for one another.³⁷

In a Facebook post, Deepak Chopra says, "Our most natural state is joy. It is the foundation for love, compassion, healing, and the desire to alleviate suffering."³⁸ Frequently, joy is evoked by a crisis that liberates, write Robert Kelleman and Karole A. Edwards in *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*. The joy resulting

³⁶ Paul Born, *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, 2014), 103.

³⁷ Born, *Deepening Community*, 103.

³⁸ Deepak Chopra, Facebook post, from December 23, 2019.

from a crisis, as with my own experience, actually becomes an agent of transformation “from victim to victor and giving rise to sustenance in present circumstances as well as future hope.”³⁹

This transforming, liberating joy is present in Scripture, which contains an estimated 800 references to joy and comparable words, including delight, rejoice, gladness, jubilation, happy, and pleasure. At St. George’s we also began to focus on joy in worship—through song, music, preaching, and in the sharing of the bread and the cup, which represent the real presence of Christ. As our awareness of joy grew, we began to hear it, speak it, feel it, see it, to seek joy in new ways, and to be transformed through this process.

What Does the Bible Say About Joy?

Scripture reveals that the sheer power of God’s word creates, transforms, liberates, sustains and enables one to resist challenges. Creation itself seems birthed out of God’s pure, raw joy—the ultimate transformation of the void of nothingness. “Let there be ... light ... heavens ... waters ... the earth.”⁴⁰ God pronounces it all good and offers confirmation of this joy later, when responding to Job’s petitions, says, “Where were you when the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?”⁴¹ God transforms weeping into joy, mourning into dancing, and clothes believers with joy.

The Joy of Jesus

Similarly, through Jesus, the divine presence continues to prompt joy in the New Testament. The nearness of Jesus’ presence, even as a child in his mother Mary’s womb,

³⁹ Robert Kelleman and Karole A. Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 31.

⁴⁰ Genesis 1:1 (NRSV).

⁴¹ Job 38:7 (NRSV).

prompts his cousin John the Baptist to leap for joy.⁴² At Jesus' birth, the angels proclaim good news of "great joy" to all the people⁴³ and the magi are "overwhelmed with joy" when the star they have been following stops over the manger.⁴⁴

The connection between joy and suffering is introduced when Jesus is blessed in the temple as an infant. As Simeon blesses Jesus he says, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and ... a sword will pierce your own soul too."⁴⁵

Similarly, Jesus' presence evokes joy. When Jesus heals, forgives, saves, resurrects, and restores—leading to transformation, liberation, and sustenance. liberates, sustains, transforms. He breaks the iron rod and helps the oppressed to resist their chains. He heals Peter's mother-in-law,⁴⁶ restores lepers and demoniacs,⁴⁷ and paralytics⁴⁸ to community. He straightens the bent-over woman.⁴⁹ By extending forgiveness and newness of life, he offers freedom from past sins⁵⁰: "Let anyone among you who has not sinned cast the first stone," he says.⁵¹

Through resurrection—his own and others'—he demonstrates the ultimate liberation from death and resistance to the culture's death-dealing ways. Jesus resurrects the daughter of Jairus,⁵² the son of the widow of Nain,⁵³ and Lazarus of Bethany.⁵⁴ After his own resurrection, Jesus' presence evokes great joy even after the resurrection—the ultimate transformation. The resurrection is the ultimate liberation from death and resistance to the culture's death-dealing

⁴² Luke 1:44 (NRSV).

⁴³ Luke 2:10-11 (NRSV).

⁴⁴ Luke 2:16 (NRSV).

⁴⁵ Luke 2:34-35 (NRSV).

⁴⁶ Matthew 8:14-16; Luke 4:38-40 (NRSV).

⁴⁷ Luke 8:39; Matthew 8:28-34 (NRSV).

⁴⁸ John 9:7 (NRSV).

⁴⁹ Luke 13:10-11 (NRSV).

⁵⁰ Luke 7:50; John 8:7b-8; John 4:7 (NRSV).

⁵¹ John 8:7 (NRSV).

⁵² Luke 8:40-42; Mark 5:22 (NRSV).

⁵³ Luke 7:11-17b (NRSV).

⁵⁴ John 11:1-44 (NRSV).

ways. This new life represents the ultimate ongoing sustenance for believers that God's promises are true.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb turns her weeping to joy.⁵⁵ The post-resurrection appearances continue to bring joy that also: strengthens faith;⁵⁶ liberates the disciples from fear,⁵⁷ and transforms them into apostles.

In Matthew's gospel, the women go with spices to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial. They are met instead by an earthquake and an angel who tells them of the resurrection. They leave quickly "with fear and great joy."⁵⁸ On the way to tell the disciples, they meet Jesus himself, and fall down at his feet and worship him.

The Gospels of Mark⁵⁹ and Luke⁶⁰ both report terror and amazement as initial responses to the resurrection. For the two men journeying in Emmaus, Jesus' presence brings a physical, visceral response: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"⁶¹

Finally, Jesus blesses the disciples as he ascends to heaven.⁶² They return to Jerusalem with great joy, awaiting the coming of the Advocate he promised to them.⁶³ After the Ascension, Jesus sends the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,⁶⁴ whose gifts include unassailable joy⁶⁵ and whose presence also evokes "joy because of." The most famous instance of the joy of the Spirit happened at Pentecost, when those who witnessed it appeared so giddy it was as if they were

⁵⁵ John 20:16-18 (NRSV).

⁵⁶ John 20:24-29 (NRSV).

⁵⁷ John 20:21-25 (NRSV).

⁵⁸ Matthew 28:7-9 (NRSV).

⁵⁹ Mark 16:8 (NRSV).

⁶⁰ Luke 24:1-12 (NRSV).

⁶¹ Luke 24:32 (NRSV).

⁶² Luke 24:51-53 (NRSV).

⁶³ Luke 24:51-53 (NRSV).

⁶⁴ John 14:16-31 (NRSV).

⁶⁵ Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV).

filled with new wine.⁶⁶

Liberation

The Word of God also liberates God's people, from slavery and oppression and from sin. The actor Charlton Heston and Hollywood filmmakers have memorialized the epic biblical battle for the liberation of the ancient Israelites, who had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years.⁶⁷ This liberation, though challenging, brings joy and songs of praise from both Moses⁶⁸ and his sister Miriam.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, God's people sing of liberation;⁷⁰ hope for restoration and return;⁷¹ "For the Lord will comfort Zion [...] joy and gladness will be found in her [...] the ransomed of the Lord shall return [...] everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."⁷² Clearly, this liberation is more than physical. It encompasses body, mind, and spirit. And fidelity to the word and commandments of God brings to God's people sustenance in suffering and complete joy at deliverance.⁷³

The Word of God Liberates

The biblical account has offered liberating strength to generations. To slaves in the antebellum South, it inspired endurance and hope. They were sustained by what Thompson has described as "joy notwithstanding"—the ability to experience joy in spite of the stark reality of their lives.⁷⁴ Theologian Howard Thurman has said that hearing God's word was so important to American slaves that it made the antebellum Negro preacher the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the community.

⁶⁶ Acts 2:13 (NRSV).

⁶⁷ Exodus 12:40-41 (NRSV).

⁶⁸ Exodus 15:1-2 (NRSV).

⁶⁹ Exodus 15:20-21 (NRSV).

⁷⁰ Psalms 105:42-44 (NRSV).

⁷¹ Isaiah 29:18-20; Jeremiah 31:1-14 (NRSV).

⁷² Isaiah 51:3, 11 (NRSV).

⁷³ John 15:10-12 (NRSV).

⁷⁴ Thompson, "Reflections on Joy in the Bible," 20.

That community included the slave, and the master was the *imago dei*, the image of God.

Thurman writes:

Many weary, spiritually and physically exhausted slaves found new strength and power gushing up into all the reaches of their personalities, inspired by the words that fell from this man's lips. He had discovered that which religion insists is the ultimate truth about human life and destiny. It is the supreme validation of the human spirit. He who knows this is able to transcend the vicissitudes of life, however terrifying, and look out on the world with quiet eyes.⁷⁵

This ability to experience joy through suffering, to experience the biblical story, deepened community among the slaves, according to Kellemen and Edwards, who wrote:

They [the slaves] are deeply connected with one another—passing from one another, shaking hands, bidding farewell, promising to meet again someday, somewhere. They are genuinely content within their own souls—knowing joy, happiness, and liberty, though outwardly experiencing the opposite.⁷⁶

Like the slaves in the American South, the word of God also inspired Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu in resisting injustice and strengthening their efforts for liberation.

Joy Notwithstanding, Liberating Joy

The efforts of the St. George's joy project to deepen our understandings of biblical joy, included a four-week Bible study of Philippians. To supplement our readings, we recalled the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who created an underground seminary in defiance of the Nazis in 1937. The Nazis had padlocked the doors of the seminaries of the Confessing Church in Germany, so Bonhoeffer simply started another one. After his capture, and shortly before his

⁷⁵ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1975), 11.

⁷⁶ Kellemen and Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*, 107.

death, he urged supporters to seek “true joy [...] which no one shall take from us, not only to those who have been called home but also to us who are alive. We are one with them in this joy.”⁷⁷

During the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States, the Rev. Martin Luther King, also found this sense of liberating joy through faith in God and God’s word. In *The Measure of a Man*, he writes:

Seek God and discover Him and make Him a power in your life [...] With Him we are able to rise from the midnight of despair to the daybreak of Joy. St. Augustine was right—we were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in Him.⁷⁸

King was assassinated in 1968, but the strength of his witness and faith sustained the Civil Rights Movement to continue his dream for equal access to education, housing and employment.

As we discussed St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we shared more contemporary illustrations of the concept of “joy notwithstanding.” For example, the revolutionary anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa after his release from prison. Like Paul, Mandela experienced a physical imprisonment, but neither allowed their confinement to misdirect an ethic of joy. Each was able to focus on unity over dissonance and reconciliation over repressive regimes. Paul’s focus seems always to be on hope and on community: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”⁷⁹

The St. George’s bible study group also shared with one another examples of the concept of “joy

⁷⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Road to Freedom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Last Writings*, ed. Susannah Black, Plough, April 9, 2018, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/witness/last-writings-of-dietrich-bonhoeffer>.

⁷⁸ “11 Powerful Martin Luther King Quotes,” God’s Fingerprints, January 16, 2017, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://godsfingerprints.co/blog/10-of-the-best-martin-luther-king-quotes>.

⁷⁹ Philippians 1:3-5 (NRSV).

notwithstanding” from our own lives. I shared that I had witnessed this amazing sense of endurance while visiting Haiti during Holy Week in 2010. Two months earlier, on January 12, 2010, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake had leveled much of the capital city of Port au Prince. At least 100,000 people had been killed. Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Episcopal Cathedral famous for its beautiful murals depicting Africans in the biblical stories, had been reduced to a pile of rubble and stones.

In spite of the mass destruction Haitian clergy had gathered on that Tuesday, March 30 in Holy Week, as is the custom of clergy across the entire Episcopal Church, to renew those ordination vows. Many clergy who had gathered there had lost family members, friends and parishioners, churches and homes in the earthquake and its aftermath. We sat on plastic folding chairs in the early evening, beside what was left of the cathedral. As we renewed our promises to God, suddenly spontaneous, joyous song burst forth from the throats of everyone. It carried power and force, sustenance and strength for the spirit, “The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord,” we sang.

Later that week, a three-hour Easter Day celebration in Hinche, about 50 miles north of Port au Prince, included five choirs and numerous musical group performances. Literally, busloads of parishioners from various other regions were arriving. Every seat in the church was filled; there was standing room only. Throughout the worship, the entire congregation was on its feet—singing, clapping, and dancing. It was the most joyful Easter service I have ever seen. Afterwards, I asked a parishioner how he could feel so happy, especially given the earthquake, given all the deaths, destruction and challenges the nation and its people were facing. Barely able to contain his joy, he replied emphatically: “Because Jesus Christ is risen. Today is Easter and Jesus *is* alive!”⁸⁰

Consequently, these more contemporary experiences of “joy notwithstanding” connected the St. George’s group more powerfully with our bible study of Philippians. The group met four weeks in

⁸⁰ Anonymous, interviewed April 4, 2010, by Pat McCaughan.

October 2019. Through those weeks, the sharing of our experiences began to change the tone of our conversations and to deepen our relationships with each other in small but noticeable ways. The changes we experienced from this undertaking began to create a ripple effect throughout the congregation. We supplemented the Bible study with N.T. Wright's *Philippians* and Max Lucado's *Life Lessons from Philippians, A Guide to Joy*. A goal of our Joy Project and the Bible study was to begin to find ways to incorporate Paul's sense of joy into the church's culture. We had hoped that the group, as well as the church, could become aware of and began to access this "joy notwithstanding" when facing the culture's challenges. Lucado writes that, in contrast to our culture, which is "marked by frustration, [...] anxieties, worries and fears" we can choose joy through community.⁸¹

We glimpsed such strength among our St. George's community as we challenged the implementation of the already-mentioned El Toro Freeway Interchange Project, a freeway-widening proposal that continues to threaten our campus. Nearly one hundred parishioners, wearing custom-designed St. George's T-shirts, attended several local city council meetings to express our concerns. As we began to share our story within the larger community, we began to recall the passion that made us a community in the first place.

Sherry, a long-time parishioner and lay leader expressed this sense of joy in the midst of challenge, noting that the freeway project, "has unified us and brought us together as a community. She recalled the passion that erupted among church members while attending those council meetings. She explained, "They were heartfelt in what they had to say about being part of this community and how important it is for us. We are all committed to our life in St. George's, however that manifests. No matter what happens, we are still St. George's."⁸²

⁸¹ Max Lucado, *Life Lessons from Philippians: A Guide to Joy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, a division of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2018), ix.

⁸² Sherry, St. George's parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 20, 2019.

Chapter 3 – Story Sparks Change

“We must approach the Bible as a story
the story of God
and of God's people throughout history.
What makes it dynamic and present
today is that the story hasn't ended.”

—Brian Hardin,
Daily Audio Bible creator

As the joy project progressed, the importance of sharing individual stories and the power of those stories became clear. One hope for the project was that it could begin to incorporate that power to deepen St. George's relationships—beyond the bible study group—to parishioners, our campus community, and the wider community around us.

Sharing our stories makes powerful connections. Choan-Seng Song, the Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion and acting minister at the Formosan United Methodist Church in San Leandro, California, argues that story is primal. He writes: “In the beginning were stories, not texts.” According to Song, “Theology is God, telling stories through countless people through the ages in every land because God loves stories.”⁸³

Song agrees with the widely-held belief that Scripture is a series of stories—about a people's understanding of their relationship with God—that have the power to transform, liberate, and strengthen. Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel, famously said, “God made man because He loves stories.”⁸⁴ He adds that what remains of a story after it is ended is another story.

Joy comes from God's stories intersecting with our stories, according to Charles Mathewes in “Toward a Theology of Joy,” an essay in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*. He writes:

Joy is provoked by something ... that comes to one, something outside oneself [...] less a general mood and more a responsive state prompted by some discrete object or action. Joy is a responsive act of exaltation and thankfulness, implicating one in an extrasubjective relationship [...] an excess beyond the self.⁸⁵

4. ⁸³ Choan-Seng Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, not Texts* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011),

⁸⁴ Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966).

⁸⁵ Mathewes, “Toward a Theology of Joy,” 66.

Our stories become intertwined with God's story, creating a ripple effect of transformation. We are empowered to tell our stories. In doing so, we enable the stories of others and in the process, create new stories together. Ella Saltmarshe contends that this power of story also helps us make sense of our chaotic world, and that it can also change systems,

It is a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres communities. It engenders empathy across difference. It enables the possible to feel probable in ways our rational minds cannot comprehend. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system, story is foundational.⁸⁶

Saltmarshe says story illuminates the past, present, and the future, and may also invite possible future change. Sharing stories aids in building cohesive communities, inviting them to connect across their differences, and create a new story together. Further, story is “the best tool,” to view the world from another's perspective, according to Saltmarshe.⁸⁷

Story also has the ability to illuminate and develop new perspectives, like in the familiar story of the blind men and the elephant. “Everyone only sees their part of the elephant,” she writes. “They see the individual stories they tell themselves about what's true. Sharing these helps them create a more expanded and accurate collective narrative. It enables them to develop a shared picture of reality.”⁸⁸

Ultimately, story helps us to change our own personal narratives and to expand the systems and the cultural narratives that frame our lives and values. “We often fail to see the stories that govern our lives,” according to Saltmarshe. “If we want to change specific systems,

⁸⁶ Ella Saltmarshe, “Using Story to Change Systems,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, February 20, 2018, accessed February 12, 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/using_story_to_change_systems.

⁸⁷ Saltmarshe, “Using Story.”

⁸⁸ Saltmarshe, “Using Story.”

we need mirrors to help us understand existing narratives and their impact, and the tools to author new ones.”⁸⁹ These new narratives spur individuals and communities to self-awareness and the ability to change their roles within those structures, according to Saltmarshe.⁹⁰

The use of collective storytelling can also build a future of redemption and restoration, according to author Alex Evans says in *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren't Enough*. He offers three principles to assist in this effort: “a larger us, a longer now, and a different good life.”

The “larger us” refers to expanding circles of empathy beyond established affinity groups, to arrive at a wider and more inclusive we. The “longer now” invites thinking beyond present political strife, and even beyond our current lifetimes. The “different good life” involves shifting materialistic values in favor of more spiritual ones.

Evans also makes the case for collective storytelling as a means to navigate the current polarizing times. In an online post, he asserts that: “Change depends on shared stories, but we cannot truly listen to anyone else’s story, much less develop shared ones, unless we are brave enough to truly tell our own.”⁹¹

Jessic Joy Senehi takes this notion a step further, in her doctoral dissertation, titled “Constructive Storytelling: Building Community, Building Peace”. She studied the process of storytelling as a way to negotiate and establish collective understandings of identity, history, and desires. She believes these findings can help facilitate “cultural spaces where people can participate in building relationships and defining their communities.” She concludes that

⁸⁹ Saltmarshe, “Using Story.”

⁹⁰ Saltmarshe, “Using Story.”

⁹¹ Alex Evans, “Myths for an Age of Political Polarisation,” *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren't Enough*, August 30, 2018 (Eden Project Books, 2017), accessed February 10, 2020, <http://mythgap.org/>.

storytelling helps develop relationships across barriers and calls for a shared identity as humans.⁹²

Similarly, Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray have recorded their success in creating community in *Our Stories Matter: Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students Through Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing*. They note that everyone needs self-validation. This need “motivates students to tell their personal stories of resistance and resiliency, of failure and success, of despair and hope, of descent and transcendence, and of powerlessness and empowerment.”⁹³

Additionally, wherever students are enabled to tell their individual and group stories, they, in turn, empower others also to share their stories. Consequently, a community is born and bound together by the need to understand each others’ stories. The result is often the discovery that individual stories share common themes, no matter how different the individual or group stories might have appeared.⁹⁴

This discovery of common themes is illustrated in the story of Dolores, a friend of mine whose son was murdered in Pomona some years ago. Dolores helped found a local chapter of Parents of Murdered Children. Although her son’s killers were never brought to justice, Dolores made it her life’s mission to reach out to others. She visited churches, jails, community and civic groups, to share her story of the toll that violence takes on a family. Regardless of the surroundings, socioeconomic status, or geographic location, each time she shared her story, a

⁹² Jessica Joy Senéhi, “Constructive Storytelling: Building Community, building peace” (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 2000), 34.

⁹³ Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray, *Our Stories Matter: Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students Through Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 16.

⁹⁴ Nash and Viray, *Our Stories Matter*, 17.

surprising number of (mostly) women, were empowered also to share previously untold stories about losing children to violence.⁹⁵

Dolores's experience of discovering commonality across geographic, socioeconomic, and racial barriers through story-sharing indicated that by participating in an ever-widening circle of story sharing, St. George's also could deepen its own relationships across communities.

Hopefully, in this way collective storytelling also could serve as a tool for other congregations to help overcome the current culture's polarization.

⁹⁵ Dolores, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, 2012.

Section II – Liberation

Chapter 4 — Daring Greatly, St. George's Story

“Worrying about scarcity is our culture’s version of post-traumatic stress. It happens when you’ve been through too much, and rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability), we’re angry and scared and at each other’s throats.”

—Dr Brené Brown
Daring Greatly

A Daring Beginning

St. George's beginnings—like our spiritual ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who set out with little more than a hope and a prayer for a new land—were also part of a daring adventure. Douglas Whiting, a Bostonian with health problems had relocated to and loved sunny Southern California. He decided to try recruiting British families as farm apprentices in El Toro, a village he was creating in South Orange County.

He purchased 8,500 acres of a failed ranch which had formerly been owned by the Serrano family, heirs of the original Spanish grantee. He met his future bride, Emily and her parents, Judge and Mrs. William Keating, on a trip to Coronado. Together, they earmarked 560 acres for El Toro. They figured that, after two years, the apprentice families could go out on their own.

As enticements for El Toro, Whiting included a library, billiard room, tennis courts, cricket field, trout and sea fishing, boating and bathing. He had strict rules: “no pistols or other weapons; no wines or spirits sold within nine miles of the town.”⁹⁶ And of course, there had to be a house of worship. St. George's grew from that arrangement. Built in the summer of 1891, the church was a one-room white San Francisco stick-style wood-frame structure (see fig. 1).⁹⁷ It was located on Whisler Drive at El Toro Road, several miles from where the current church building now stands.



Fig. 4.1. Original St. George's Church now located in Heritage Hill Park.

⁹⁶ The Historical Society of Laguna Woods, “St. George's Episcopal Mission Church,” *The Historian: Preserving Today for Tomorrow* 2, no. 5 (September-October 2008): 1, 4.

⁹⁷ Fig. 1. Laguna Woods Historical Society photos.

Later additions—a dressing room/sacristy and altar area—transformed it into a cruciform shape. Its founding predates even the formation in 1895, of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, of our adjudicatory.

The Keatings also donated a house with three acres of land for a vicarage and 36 acres for olive trees to provide income for the church. According to the Laguna Woods Historical Society, one early newspaper account said the original church cost about \$500 to build.⁹⁸ The church was named for Emily's brother who had recently died, and for St. George, the patron saint of England.

While the church was still under construction, the El Toro residents held their first service on June 7, 1891, a Sunday evening, in the freight room of the Santa Fe Railroad Station. About 50 people attended. The Rev. George Robinson, formerly of London, England, officiated. On October 3, the Rt. Rev. William Ford Nichols, Assistant Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California, dedicated the church and baptized the infant son of Dwight and Emily Whiting. According to historical documents of the church, Nichols returned December 3 to consecrate the building. There is a framed certificate commemorating the occasion hanging on the wall of the former church, now located in Heritage Hill Park in the city of Lake Forest.

Ultimately, Whiting's great adventure drew only about ten English families. They tried growing almonds, prunes, apricots, bananas, olives, and eucalyptus trees, which Whiting had hailed as a miracle wood. But by about 1910 the colony had all but disbanded. Its members moved on.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Laguna Woods Historical Society, "St. George's Episcopal Mission," 4.

⁹⁹ Laguna Woods Historical Society, "St. George's Episcopal Mission," 4.

Subsequent Challenging Times Spark Adaptability

St. George's was the single remaining survivor of Whiting's daring adventure. Yet, the church faced its own difficult challenges in the 1920s and 1930s through successive seasons of torrential rains and droughts. The inclement weather prompted much of the population to flee. The church was served by circuit-riding priests who also led worship in congregations in the growing cities of Anaheim, Tustin, Santa Ana, and Orange. The challenging weather and scarcity of available clergy rendered worship at St. George's irregular.¹⁰⁰

As the St. George's congregation dwindled, circumstances forced flexibility, hospitality, and adaptability. The church opened its doors to other Christian denominations and hosted the first Jewish services in the Saddleback Valley. In 1940, a nondenominational church school was founded at St. George's, which was attended by children of several Christian denominations, including Methodist and Presbyterian.

Comeback-ability—A New Church

The church began to experience a comeback. By Easter Day 1943, regular services had resumed. An entry in the church register records that "54 persons attended the five services held that day" and "the collection, \$46.70, was the largest Easter offering since 1899."¹⁰¹

Within a few short decades, the Saddleback area changed dramatically. The opening of the senior community Leisure World (now known as Laguna Woods Village) in 1964 and the founding of the city of Mission Viejo a year later, brought an influx of members to the church. The church's first vicar, the Rev. Frederick C. Hammond, was appointed by the bishop in 1966, and members began to look for a new, expanded location. Leisure World's founder, Ross

¹⁰⁰Laguna Woods Historical Society, "St. George's Episcopal Mission," 4.

¹⁰¹St. George's Episcopal Church Register. Historical Documents of the Church.



Fig. 4 2. Groundbreaking Ceremony, July 1968.

Cortese, made land available at cost for a new church in Laguna Hills. St. George's purchased three-and-a-half acres and held a groundbreaking ceremony in July of 1968 (see fig. 2).¹⁰²

A year later, on May 1, 1969, the Rt. Rev. Robert C. Gooden, Bishop Suffragan of the Diocese of Los Angeles, officiated at the laying of the cornerstone at the church's present site. Included in the cornerstone was a Bible, the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*, a 75-year history of the church, and a record of its founders and members.¹⁰³

The current church (see fig. 3)¹⁰⁴ is the Spanish mission style building pictured in the photo, which was taken at the church's 125-year anniversary celebration in 2016. The 7,500-square-foot church is topped by a 50-foot bell tower, has 15-foot ceilings and seats for 325 persons. The first services were held there on July 27, 1969. The same year, the church graduated from mission status (dependent upon financial assistance from the diocese) to full-fledged parish status. Hammond retired in 1972. His successor, the Rev. Robert L Bonhall, arrived a year later.

¹⁰² Fig. 2. Historical Society of Laguna Woods, "St. George's Episcopal Mission."

¹⁰³ Historical Society of Laguna Woods, "St. George's Episcopal Mission," 4.

¹⁰⁴ Fig. 3. St. George's 125th anniversary celebration, 2016. Photo, Bob Howe.



Fig. 4.3. St. George's 125th Anniversary Celebration. Photo, Pat McCaughan.

The church continued to add buildings and improvements. A multiuse-use building known as the Meriwether Religious Museum was added. Stained-glass windows were installed in 1979. One window pays homage to the original church building and features a likeness of St. George, poised to slay the dragon. Other windows are dedicated to Episcopal churches in the surrounding area. In the sanctuary, on either side of the cross, 12-feet by 5-feet mosaic panels, made of Byzantine blue glass with gold and silver leaf accents, were installed. One depicts the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist; the other shows Jesus instituting the Eucharist. The women of the church stitched needlepoint kneelers and chair covers. They are still in use today.

Meanwhile, the restoration of the original mission church had also begun. One of several historical buildings located in Heritage Hill Park, it is now used for weddings and special events. We held a worship service there as part of a yearlong celebration in 2016 of our 125th

anniversary. It is managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation.¹⁰⁵

Return to St. George's Roots

Unfortunately, after Bonhall's 1984 retirement, the church experienced a series of incidents of alleged sexual, financial and other misconduct by several clergy. One clergyperson, who maintained his innocence, was convicted in a church ecclesiastical trial of sexual misconduct and removed from ministry.

The resultant broken trust, internal division, conflict and denial is evident in church historical documents and, to some extent, lingers today. For example, church records indicate that more than 100 parishioners attended a going away party for the priest who was convicted of sexual misconduct and removed from ministry. Yet only ten members attended the funeral of one of his alleged victims later the same year. The young man, a member of the U.S. Navy, had taken his own life.¹⁰⁶

Though it is long in the past, this misconduct is still very much a part of St. George's story. There are current members who attended St. George's during that priest's tenure. Others left but returned once he was removed. They still speak of that devastating time as though it were recent history. I am told that the former priest continues to live somewhere in the neighborhood. Though I was unaware of his presence, he even attended the funeral of a clergy colleague that was held at St. George's just last year.

Just a few years ago, another of his alleged victims—a young man challenged by mental illness—came to the campus and proclaimed it the epicenter of all evil in the universe. He made

¹⁰⁵ Laguna Woods Historical Society, "St. George's Episcopal Mission," 4.

¹⁰⁶ Historical Documents of the Church.

statements that were interpreted as threats. My predecessor summoned local authorities, who forcibly removed and arrested him, again sparking anger, internal conflict, and mistrust.

Meanwhile, financial challenges had forced the St. George's Academy, a Christian school serving preschool through the eighth grade, to close all grade levels except the preschool. Construction—of an office and education building, plus a church—left the parish deeply in debt. The bishop appointed me to serve as interim priest after my predecessor's abrupt departure, and later appointed me as vicar when St. George's reverted from parish to mission status. This change in status was necessary, because of the church's financial instability. There have been several times when we had to borrow money from parishioners to make payroll.

This move from parish to mission status was very contentious. It was viewed by many as a step backwards to a second-class kind of status. Yet it would provide us with additional diocesan resources and financial assistance. St. George's was reeling from crushing debt, decades of deferred maintenance, and ongoing fallout from broken clergy trust. Diocesan representatives, then Bishop Suffragan Mary Glasspool, and Clare Zabala, the diocesan coordinator for missions, addressed the congregation at two separate all-parish meetings, to provide information and answer questions. Still, as a result of the status change, some people left.

Within the next three years, financial realities dictated closure of the preschool—the remaining portion of the St. George's Academy—which also had been failing financially. Some church administrative and facilities staff were let go, which also resulted in internal conflict, anger, and more departures of parishioners. When people leave a congregation, especially as the result of conflict or a disagreement, it is often perceived as a failure. Many people at St.

George's, it appeared to me, had seemed to develop a fear of people leaving, which discouraged open and honest communication.

As part of the Joy Project, we began to frame such occurrences as examples of Fujimura's genesis moments. These moments lead to new life, which is "fueled by generosity because it so often must work against a mindset that has survival and utility in the foreground." He adds,

Generative thinking often starts out with a failure ... it is a place of learning and potential creativity. In such moments you can get lost in despair or denial, or you can recognize the failure and run toward the hope of something new.¹⁰⁷

We decided to run toward the hope of something new.

As St. George's grappled with a lot of questions about the El Toro freeway project and very few answers, I turned to the wisdom of the church theologians like Miroslav Volf. He says that joy is hard work. To those who wish to lead a joyful life, he advises: "Open your eyes to the goodness, to what is good in your life and in the lives of others."¹⁰⁸ I also began to investigate what neuroscientists Rick Hanson, a psychologist and neuroscientist, calls this "taking in the good, a method to use the mind to change the brain over time for the better."¹⁰⁹

Taking in the good is a way to soak up positive moments throughout a day. These moments may be as seemingly insignificant as checking something off a to-do list; and allowing one's self the experience of sinking into the moment, and of the moment's sinking into you, whether through visualization or another practice.¹¹⁰

With this understanding, the Joy Project began to create a campus environment intended to

¹⁰⁷ Fujimura, *Culture Care*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Adelle M. Banks, "Miroslav Volf delves into the Theology of Joy: a Q&A," *Religion News Service*, May 21, 2018, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2018/05/21/miroslav-volf-delves-into-the-theology-of-joy-a-qa/>.

¹⁰⁹ Rick Hanson, "How to Take in the Good," Neurosculpting Institute, January 2, 2017 (blog), accessed September 2019, <https://neurosculptinginstitute.com/take-good-rick-hanson-ph-d/>.

¹¹⁰ Hanson, blog.

facilitate joy. These efforts included the following elements: a general questionnaire and accompanying five-day spiritual practices journal; a four-week Bible study of Philippians; a joy-focused sermon series; and “Joy-News” in our electronic newsletter. This experimental year also included the physical transformation of our campus to an environment designed to facilitate choosing joy.

I also began to research what neuroscience says about adapting to change. Neuroscientists study the brain’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Hanson and others believe that thoughts, if repeated enough, can create physical changes to the brain’s neural pathways. In other words, what I think and soak up, is what I become. So, experience really does matter. “If a person feels grateful for a few seconds, that’s nice. That’s better than feeling resentful or bitter for a few seconds,” Hanson says. “But [...] we need to stay in those experiences for a longer duration of time—we need to take steps, consciously, to keep that spotlight of attention on the positive.”¹¹¹ Jim Wilder and Marcus Warner say that St. Paul even hints at neuroplasticity when he urges the Philippians, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”¹¹²

Shared joy is the most powerful relational experience that exists for communities like St. George’s, according to Wilder and Warner in *Rare Leadership: Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy and Engagement in the People You Lead*. “Joy is always relational and the more that it is shared, the more it multiplies and amplifies other good emotions,” they write.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Hanson, blog.

¹¹² Philippians 4:8 (NRSV).

¹¹³ Jim Wilder and Marcus Warner, *Rare Leadership: 4 Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy and Engagement in the People You Lead* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 132.

On the third Sunday after the Epiphany, the power of Nehemiah's words had inspired me to depart from my customary practice of preaching from the gospel text only. That Sunday, I automatically delivered a joy-focused sermon. The opposite of joy is not sadness or sorrow, but anxiety, I said. Jesus says that we are to rest in God's love so that his joy may be in us and that our joy may be complete.

I referenced Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's 2017 book, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy*. She relates how, after the sudden death of her husband Dave Goldberg at age 47, she developed a practice of writing down three moments of joy each day before going to sleep.¹¹⁴ I had challenged the congregation, what if we were to emulate her defiant joy? Together, we set out to do so.

¹¹⁴ Frances Bridges, "5 Ways to Build Resilience, from Sheryl Sandberg's and Adam Grant's New Book 'Option B'," *Forbes*, May 27, 2017, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/francesbridges/2017/05/27/5-ways-to-build-resilience-from-sheryl-sandberg-and-adam-grants-new-book-option-b/#2c95d5994115>.

Chapter 5 — Living Joyously

A Campus Project

“Shared joy is perhaps the most powerful
relational experience that exists.”

—Paul Born
*Deepening Community:
Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*

While wondering what a Joy Project might look like, or be like, we decided to make a team effort and to just get started. Once we began focusing on joy, it became infectious—like the way it is said sometimes that faith is caught, not taught. It seemed many of us caught the joy bug. We began simply by asking questions: What does joy have to do with our mission? What is our mission? And what does our mission statement say about us, especially to those who don't know us?

We discovered that the mission statement was so long, that no one could remember it, much less repeat it. This statement of purpose had not been updated in at least a decade. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann says the mission of the church is to cultivate joy among the people of God.¹¹⁵ We loved that understanding of the church. As our bishop's committee—our primary leadership team—debated the Who, What, Where, When and Why of our mission, our ethic and values became obvious to us.

Our efforts resulted in this mission statement: “We are a spiritual oasis, welcoming and striving to serve all in the hope and love of Jesus Christ.” Creation of this new mission statement prompted the design of a new church logo as well.

Mercedese, a member of the bishop's committee and a professional artist, created a new logo that, unlike the previous one or any others I've seen, incorporates people (see fig. 4).¹¹⁶ It is used on all our correspondence and communications, including our weekly electronic newsletter and worship bulletins. We hope that it telegraphs the message that the church is the people.

¹¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Christianity: A Religion of Joy,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing, Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 6.

¹¹⁶ Fig. 4. St. George's logo, created by Mercedese Bantz, used with permission.

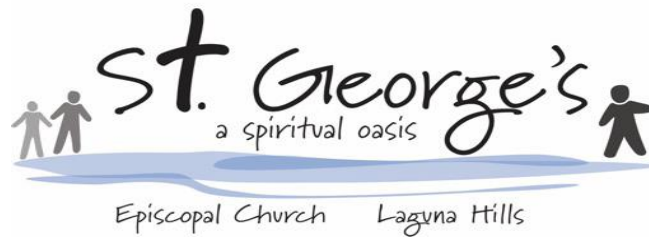


Fig. 5.1. St. George's Redesigned Logo.

The image of an oasis speaks of respite in the desert, of refreshment, renewal, restoration, a place to resist the forces of the culture that can weigh on us. It can mean staying for the long-term or moving on when necessary. I have referenced the logo, whenever possible, as a teachable moment to help illustrate acceptance that change is both a necessary and unavoidable part of life and that it really is okay for people to move on if they need to.



Fig. 5.2. St. George's Joy Logo.

A New 'Joy' Logo

We also decided to create a new logo (see fig. 5)¹¹⁷ for the Joy Project. It has been used on many

¹¹⁷ Fig. 5. Logo created by Mercedes Bantz, used with permission.

of our communications and is featured prominently throughout the campus, a reminder of our pledge to live a joyful year.



Fig. 5.3. Angel Wings Mural, located on the St. George's Church Exterior Wall.

As we wondered where and how else to telegraph our joy in visible ways, we painted an angel wings mural (see fig. 6)¹¹⁸ painted on the side of the church, inviting visitors to pause and remember that they are created in joy by God and for God, and that they are beloved and holy. We added a message board (see fig. 7)—an interactive chalkboard attached to the exterior church wall, near the angel wings mural. Observing weekly responses on the board, prompted the question: Who are the people writing on the board who share our campus?

For some time, the church has been allowing nonmembers, referred to by some parishioners as “outside groups,” to meet in the church or hall when not in use. Still, a campus audit had revealed that, like many churches, with the exception of Sundays and some weekends

¹¹⁸ Fig. 6. Mural created by Mercedes Bantz, used with permission.

or special holidays, most of our campus buildings sat empty much of the week.¹¹⁹



Fig. 5.4. St. George's Message Board, mounted on the church's exterior wall. Photo, Pat McCaughan.

For some time, the church has been allowing nonmembers, referred to by some parishioners as “outside groups,” to meet in the church or hall when not in use. Still, a campus audit had revealed that, like many churches, with the exception of Sundays and some weekends or special holidays, most of our campus buildings sat empty much of the week.¹²⁰

This awareness sparked a creative, expansive vision to fill the buildings round-the-clock and to regard not just the Sunday congregation as part of our family but everyone who visits our campus. The goal became not to get more people into the pews but to spread our joy to as many

¹¹⁹ Congregational Business Consultants for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, *Guide to the Utilization of Church Property: How to Evaluate Your Church's Real Estate for More Full Use* (September 2009; rev. March 2010), 3.

¹²⁰ Congregational Business Consultants for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, *Guide to the Utilization of Church Property: How to Evaluate Your Church's Real Estate for More Full Use* (September 2009; rev. March 2010), 3.

people as possible. The goal became not necessarily to make more money by renting additional space more of the time (although we didn't mind offsetting some of our debt) but to live more deeply into our mission statement. We aimed to truly welcome all in the hope and love of Jesus Christ. We began to live more deeply into our goal to be a spiritual oasis, a place of peace and healing, that could transform "outside groups" into the St. George's campus family.

Next Stop: A Community Hub

We stepped up efforts to make space available to those who needed it. The need for affordable meeting space in Orange County is amazing. Some organizations, like the Saddleback Community College Emeritus Program (SCCEP), use our space Monday through Friday, free of charge. They hold classes, ranging from Introductory and Intermediate Spanish to Philosophy and Creative Writing. It is wonderful to see the parking lot full and to feel that we are participating in enriching and changing lives in this way!

We also experienced an increase in participation from all groups, including other worshipping communities. In addition to the Laguna Indonesian Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which meets on Saturdays, we added two new faith communities who worship on Sundays in Spanish. They also hold Bible studies on some weeknights.

The number of recovery groups meeting on our campus has nearly doubled, from 18 to more than 30, including one conducted in Farsi and another dedicated to the special concerns of the LGBTQ community. We added Zumba and Karate classes as well.

Currently, we host an estimated 2,000 guests on campus each week, from preschool children to senior citizens. Including SCCEP, our campus family encompasses five schools: Pathways, for preschool through eighth grade students with learning disabilities; Community

Seedlings, a preschool; and Futaba, a Japanese-language preschool. A Japanese language cultural school for students of all ages also meets on the campus on Saturdays.

Additionally, we are a testing site for home-schooled students. We host Scouting groups as well as the Creative Kids Playhouse (CKP), an afterschool enrichment program. This program teaches youth all aspects of theater, from set design, to stage management, to acting, and culminates in a year-end production, also held at St. George's. Several groups, like The Sweet Adelines, a women's empowerment chorus, also rehearse weekly on our campus.

St. George's also appeals to Pokémon aficionados, since the campus is a PokeStop!



Fig. 5.6.. A Quinceañera Court of Honor celebrating at St. George's.

Cultural, Social Events

We host civic and cultural events on campus, like this La Quinceañera honoree and members of her court of honor, (see fig. 8).¹²¹ We hired professional event planners to manage our church hall and campus. They are bilingual in Spanish and English and are developing new

¹²¹ Fig. 8. Photo by St. George's Staff. Used with permission.

opportunities for marketing the campus for special events. Becoming more adept at marketing is in response to a directive from the diocese that congregations, especially mission congregations like St. George's, become more financially self-sufficient. To that end, our diocese created a Social Enterprise Academy in 2019.

Our staff event planners, J.C. and Sandra, have begun developing creative ways to maximize campus use, including a Friday Night Social and a weekly “battle of the bands” that has created a following among the local music community.

With their guidance, we increased capacity to host multiple events at the same time, and are able now to offer St. George's as a full-service entertainment venue. Other groups also maintain office space on the campus, like the Orange County Women's Chorus.

A Prayer Tree



*Figs. 5.7 and 5.8. St. George's Prayer Tree at the entrance to the campus, invites prayer.
Photo, Pat McCaughan.*

Our campus transformation continued to infuse us with infectious joy. Bob, one parishioner, asked to transform an existing tree into a prayer tree (figs.9-10). A sign posted on the tree offers instructions. The tree is positioned at the entryway to our campus from the parking lot, so that

nearly everyone who enters the campus passes by it. A small mailbox beneath the sign contains markers, zip ties and tags, to write a prayer and attach it to the tree. It is a space of peace. People pause at the tree and read the prayers zip-tied there. They write and attach their own prayers or just stand there and are inspired to pray themselves.

Periodically, the prayers are removed and included with others we keep at a free-standing altar in a prayer corner in the church narthex. There are also candles to light, while praying. A Tuesday evening church prayer group prays these prayers for and with their authors. And, when we light the new fire for our Easter Vigil, all these slips of paper with prayers are burned, their smoke a symbol of their rising to the heavens, of God receiving our prayers.

The new fire is used to light the paschal candle, which leads the procession on one of the holiest nights of our church year. This candle is a symbol for Jesus Christ, our paschal lamb who gave his life that we might inherit eternal life. This candle stands front and center at every baptism and burial service in the Episcopal Church as a sign of Christ's ongoing presence in our lives. In a small but powerful way, the prayer tree helps to connect and intertwine our prayers with the community's prayers. It also telegraphs a message of peace. We are marking progress on welcoming everyone—no more references to “outside groups”

Community Partnerships

St. George's began to reach out in other ways, actively cultivating community partnerships. The church invested in a City of Laguna Hills community social media project. The city's website receives about 20,000 visits per month. We are included in a website video tour highlighting the community's quality of life. See fig. 11 for a screen shot from the video. It represents a St. Francis Day celebration and outdoor pet blessing held at the church.



Fig. 5.9. Computer Screen Shot depicting St. George's Welcome Video on City of Laguna Hills Website.

A Joy Café

As we welcomed more campus visitors, we were inspired to create a Joy Café, with underutilized space (see fig. 12). The café is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and offers coffee, tea, and snacks, even breakfast burritos. We hope to compete with local coffee shops.



Fig. 5.10. Campus visitors take a coffee break at St. George's Joy Café. Photo, Pat McCaughan

As we continued to develop alternate revenue streams, we added outdoor furniture including chairs (see fig.13), where visitors and guests can sit and sip a cup of coffee, check cell phones, or enjoy a quiet conversation. Outdoor couches are also placed strategically throughout the campus.

A Joy Print Shop

St. George's enterprising staff recognized other opportunities. The increase in weddings, quinceañeras, other cultural events and celebrations held in our church hall, invited the creation of the Joy Print Shop. We now print invitations and the stationery for these events. We also bid for other contracts, like the advertisement for a local professional car wash company (see fig. 13).¹²²



Fig. 5.11. Banner Created by St. George's Joy Print Shop for a local customer.

The print shop also enables us to save money by creating our own banners, (see fig. 14), for the 50-year anniversary of the dedication of the current church building.¹²³

¹²² Fig. 13, Banner created by St. George's staff.

¹²³ Fig. 14, Banner created by St. George's staff.



Fig. 5.12. St. George's Joy Print Shop Banner commemorating the 50th anniversary of church building.

New Signage

The print shop inspired us to focus on our campus signage (see fig. 15), and aids in church marketing efforts, with banners publicizing upcoming events and worship series.



Fig. 5.13. Church Signage created by the St. George's Joy Print Shop. Photo, Pat McCaughan.

Section II: Liberation

Chapter 6 — The Joy of the Lord

Joy is:

“Knowing that whatever life throws at me,
God is in charge!”

—*An anonymous St. George’s Joy Survey respondent*

As the St. George's campus outwardly underwent transformation, I began to wonder about the inner life of the church members. I wanted to hear from as many people as possible, to know what parishioners believe about joy and how it has informed their lives. In an effort to take the congregation's collective "joy pulse," I devised a questionnaire that was mailed out to about 120 active and current St. George's members. I received 28 completed surveys, for about a 21.6 percent return rate. The questionnaire also included a cover letter, requesting that, in addition to responding to the survey, parishioners complete a five-day spiritual practices journal.

A majority—22 of those who responded to the survey—also filled out the spiritual journal. Six people did not. One person said it was too time-consuming. The journal was included as a spiritual practice designed for members to begin to become aware of moments of joy in the course of a five-day period. The journal was developed and used with permission by Ingrid Fetell Lee, a designer and the founder of the Internet blog, *The Aesthetics of Joy*.¹²⁴ She has been featured as an expert on design and joy by the *New York Times*, *Wired*, PRI's *Studio 360*, CBC's *Spark*, and *Fast Company*. Samples of both the questionnaire and the joy journal are included in the appendix.

Survey respondents were invited to record their activities, relationships, and experiences of joy during those five days. This effort aimed to determine if, by pausing and becoming aware of moments of joy, they could increase their awareness of joy and choose to replicate it at other times as a means of sustenance.

The results, while representing a small sample size, are believed to offer some sense of the congregation's general perceptions and practice of joy. A general sampling of the survey questions and the responses follows, beginning with fig. 16, which asks for a definition of joy.

¹²⁴ Ingrid Fetell Lee, Joy Journal, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://www.aestheticsofjoy.com/resources/>.

Equal numbers (11.1 percent) of the respondents defined joy as: service to others; experiences of God and/or wonder; and living an ethic of joy. An overwhelming 70 percent considered it a

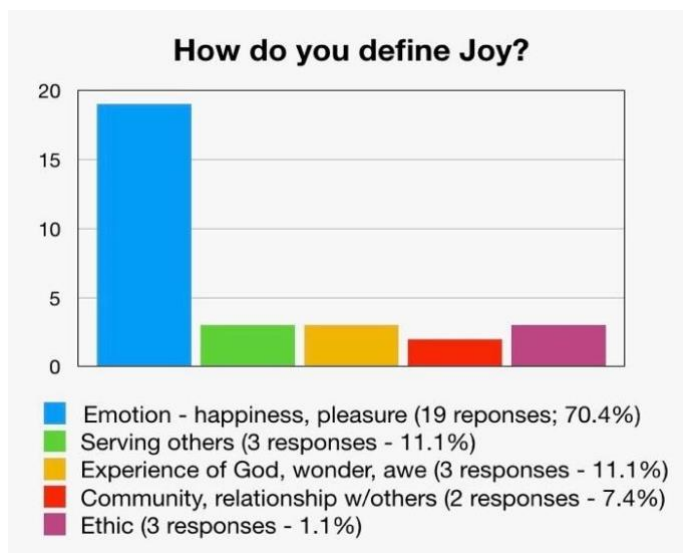


Fig. 4.1. Joy Survey Question 1 responses: “How do you define joy?”

sense of happiness or pleasure while 7.4 percent connected it to community and family relationships. The ethic category describes those who considered joy to be a deep, steadfast confidence, regardless of exterior circumstances, that propels them through life. One respondent wrote that for her joy meant, “Knowing that whatever life throws at me, God is in charge!”¹²⁵

Understandings of Joy

Fig. 17 illustrates responses regarding biblical joy. About 40 percent of respondents connected joy with their relationships with God, and 22 percent, with an ethic of life. Others cited perceived biblical truths, such as, “God gives us joy in all his creation and we are to show him praise and joy in it.”¹²⁶ Or, “We can have joy in knowing that God will never abandon us even as we

¹²⁵ St. George’s Church Joy Survey 1, Question 1, Participant 15.

¹²⁶ St. George’s Church Joy Survey 1, Question 2, Participant 8.

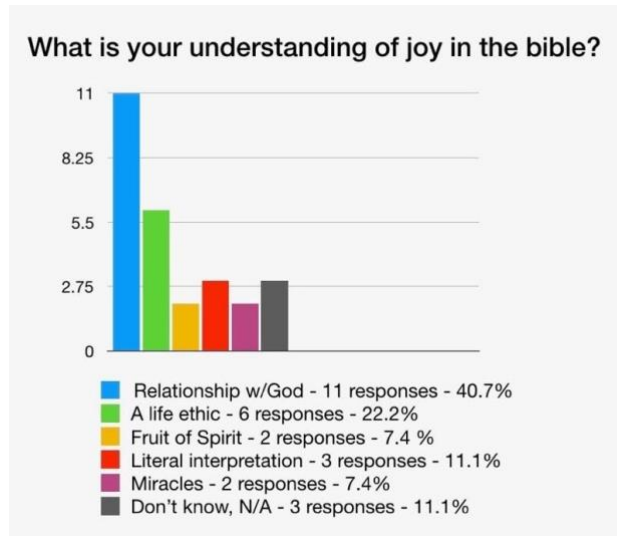


Fig. 6.2. Most respondents said they derived joy from their relationships with God and others.

experience difficult times.”¹²⁷ Some mentioned miracles and trusting in God’s and Jesus’ love. Others cited Scripture.

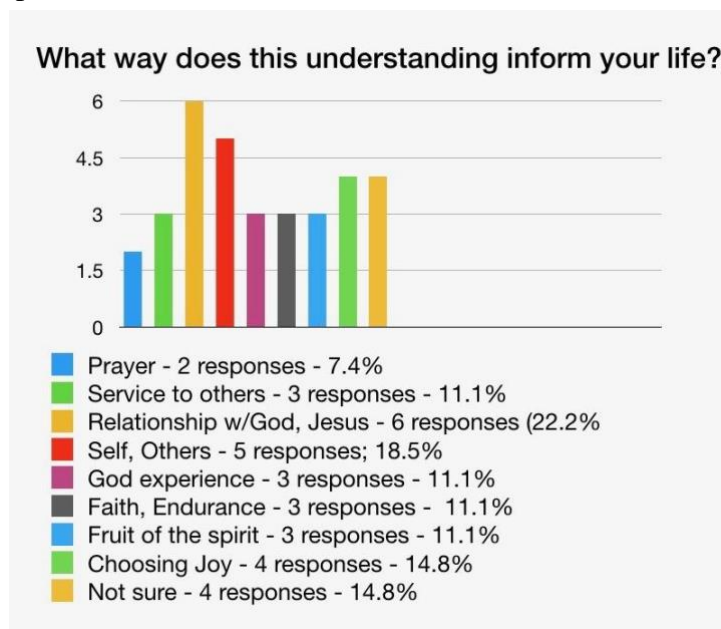


Fig. 6.3. Question 3 asked respondents how their understanding of joy informed how they live.

A majority, 27 percent of respondents, also said that their understanding of joy had deepened their relationships in some way. Fig. 18 indicates these results, citing relationships with God (6),

¹²⁷ St. George’s Joy Survey 1, Question 2, Participant 11.

others (5), and self (5). One respondent wrote: “As God’s children, we are worthy of joy. God wants us to not only work ethically and do the right thing, but also experience joy and peace.”¹²⁸ Some mentioned that Scripture seemed difficult to understand and that they related more with the New than the Old Testament.

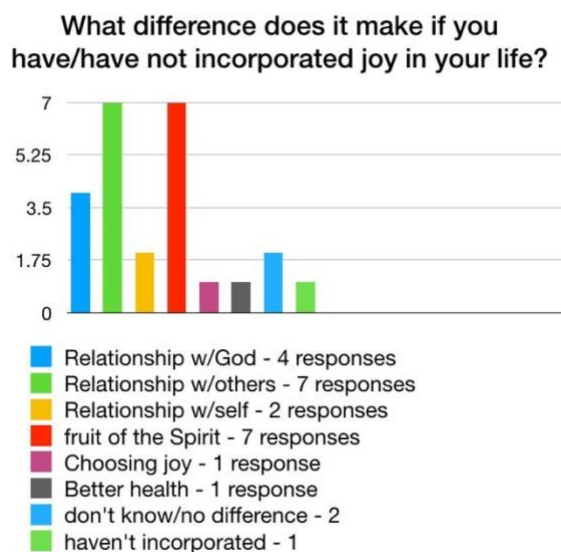


Fig. 6.4. Equal numbers of respondents experienced joy as a fruit of the Spirit, and said it had positively impacted their lives.

Fig. 19 details responses to the fourth question: “What difference does it make if you have/have not incorporated joy in your life?” This question attempted to understand if members were actively aware of joy and seeking it in their lives. Equal numbers (7) of respondents said choosing joy had positively influenced relationships with others and that they had experienced it as a fruit of the Spirit. Some related to joy as a sense of gratitude. One wrote: “I try to be positive and not negative, to be thankful for what I receive”¹²⁹ Another respondent related joy to “knee-buckling, awesome responsibility to prepare one’s spirit to receive goodness, love, beauty, truth

¹²⁸ St. George’s Joy Survey 1, Question 2, Participant 21.

¹²⁹ St. George’s Joy Survey 1, Question 3, Participant 14.

and eventually peace.”¹³⁰ Additional comments quoted below

revealed a depth of understanding and a sense of church members, seeking to consciously choose joy as sustenance:

- “Sometimes the weight of everyday is overwhelming and I forget—or have buried—this deep-down joy. But, when I remember, am reminded, then the weight is lifted, the clouds clear and I am able to go on and feel joy. Not necessarily happiness, but joy that is everlasting;”¹³¹
- “I have no doubt that He has been with me from birth. Somehow, with my mother’s miscarriages I, the only survivor was born (with one kidney);”¹³²
- “A sense of well-being because God is with me through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. Something to be shared with others. Look for joy rather than predicting or concentrating on problems. Remind others to do the same. Share your joy with others.”¹³³

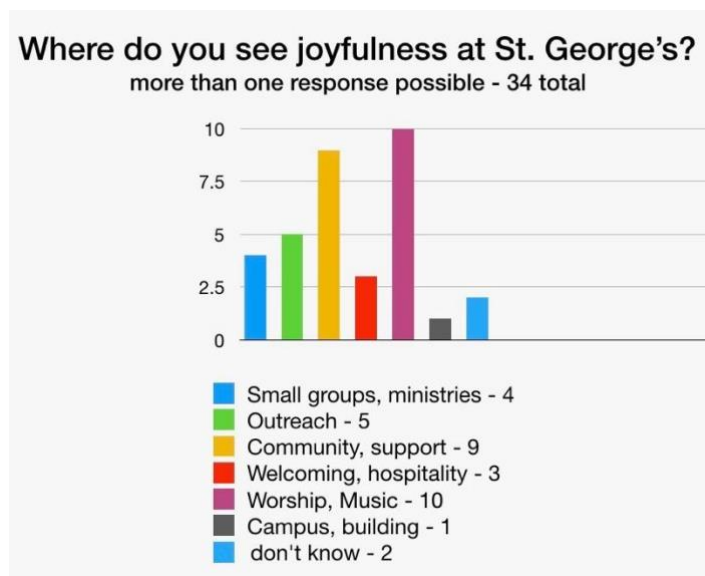


Fig. 6.5. Respondents were asked where they found joyfulness at St. George's.

Fig. 20 indicates where members reported experiencing joyfulness at church. Respondents were encouraged to offer more than one answer. Most people (10), or 29.4 percent, reported feeling

¹³⁰ St. George's Joy Survey 1, Question 3, Participant 12.

¹³¹ St. George's Joy Survey 1, Question 3, Participant 20.

¹³² St. George's Joy Survey 1, Question 3, Participant 13.

¹³³ St. George's Joy Survey 1, Question 3, Participant 26.

joy palpably through preaching, music, liturgy, and parish life. At least 26 percent (9), felt the community's support of one another was very important.

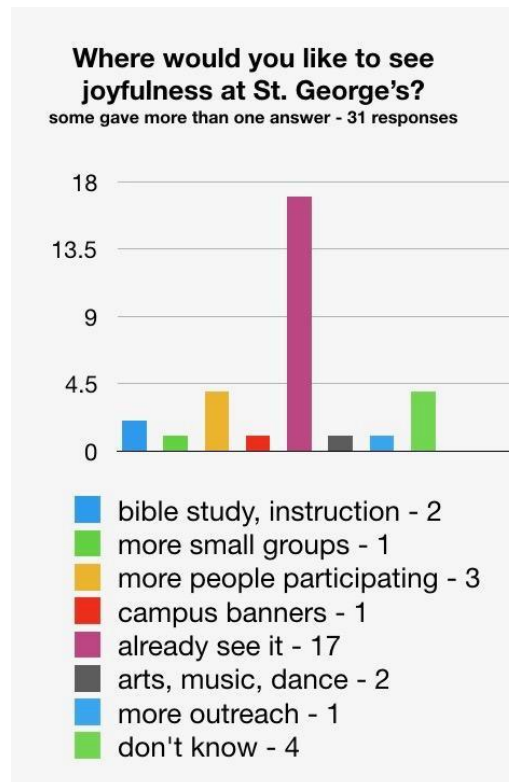


Fig. 6.6. More than half of those responding said they already find joyfulness at the church.

The sixth and final question (see fig. 21) inquired where respondents would you like to see joyfulness at St. George's. More than half indicated they already experience joyfulness at the church. It was illuminating to receive this feedback, and to consider their responses through the lens of creative possibility.

This feedback prompted some generative questions, such as: How might St. George's participate more fully in what God is doing right here and now? How might we involve music, dance, and other arts to further cultivate joy? We offered, in response to some survey results, a Festival of Joy in mid-September and a Spirit Dance Event on a Sunday after church in late September. Overall, the survey results indicated a strong ethic of both service and community

outreach, a sense of joy associated with God's presence and in worship.

Joyfinding—Journaling Joy

A spiritual practices journal was included in the original St. George's survey in the hopes of creating greater awareness of joy. The hope is, of course, to make joy more easily recognizable and so, more attainable.

About 22 people, or about 18 percent, completed the journal. One person commented that the survey and journal were too time-consuming.¹³⁴ Generally, respondents experienced joy with others, in relationships with people, in nature and/or with pets.

Others referenced feeling joy in recovery groups and in a therapy session. The questionnaire, (included in the appendix) also asked about the sights, sounds, aromas, textures, and flavors that were present with their experiences of joy. One respondent, who arranged flowers for the Sunday morning worship, mentioned the laughter and relationship and the deeper connection she felt with other church members, similarly engaged.¹³⁵

One respondent noted: "I hope to celebrate 36 years of sober living on September 19. Everyone expressed gratitude to be at the [recovery] meeting and sharing. It gives me joy to see all these people sober and giving of their experiences."¹³⁶

Another survey respondent mentioned experiencing joy through nature as she had been

Enjoying the vivid blue coloring of the scrub jay and hearing the jay announce his arrival with a bird call. They land on a wire ring that is filled with peanuts. They pull one out and fly away with the peanut. I wonder where the peanut will be stored. It's joyful to me to appreciate wildlife and support the birds with food and water. A simple pleasure that makes me pause from daily routine.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Joy Survey 1, Participant 12.

¹³⁵ Joy Journal, Day 1, Participant 1.

¹³⁶ Joy Journal, Participant 2.

¹³⁷ Joy Journal, Participant 15.

In the survey responses, there was also a reference to St. George's recent stewardship campaign. We developed 'St. George's NOW,' this year in an attempt to draw our focus away from the specter of the El Toro Interchange Project and the uncertainty of its future impact upon us. This campaign was reinforced through brief announcements at Sunday worship.

Chuck, the St. George's Stewardship Chair, engaged the congregation with questions designed to invite parishioners to share their stories with one another. For example, one of his questions was: Who is the longest-attending St. George's church member? Also supplementing the campaign and weekly talks, were a Family Game Night and an Ice Cream Social, held after church. Members of the St. George's Bishop's Committee scooped the flavors, which was acknowledged gratefully in a survey response: "Comfort food, apple pie and chocolate ice cream—first time for breakfast! Bishop's Committee treat!"¹³⁸ Another reference to the same event was, "Coffee, people greeting one another and chatting, Sharing the bounty of table and ice cream. Grateful one bishop's committee person came over and asked if I wanted ice cream and delivered it. I forget the food when engaged with someone."¹³⁹

The Ice Cream Social offered St. George's another opportunity to deepen campus relationships, when the stewardship committee members also hosted an ice cream social for Futaba preschoolers and their families. St. George's was frequently referenced in the survey as a place where people experienced joy whether during worship, or involvement in a small group ministry, including flower arranging and a church book group.

¹³⁸ Joy Journal, Participant 20.

¹³⁹ Joy Journal, Participant 1.

Section III – Resistance

Chapter 7—Signifying Lives, Voices of St. George’s

“We invest a little of our infectious joy in the community,
and it germinates.
People begin to come to us, but not to be inoculated.
Strangely, they wish to catch this virus,
to be exposed to this highly contagious notion
that either all of us matter or none of us do.”

—Robin Meyers
The Underground Church

The Joy Project aimed to include a range of voices and stories. We embraced the ancient prophetic voices of St. Paul, Miriam, Moses, and John the Baptist, those who have borne witness to joy through Scripture. We included the more recent, heroic voices of those who kept the faith in the midst of great challenge—the voices of an Unnamed Slave in the antebellum South, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Rev. Martin Luther King. We also sampled more contemporary voices, of theologians, and St. George’s members, and even guests on the church campus, as we sought to deepen our understanding of joy. These efforts resulted in an enlarged vision and a deepened understanding of joy.

We discovered, for example, the voice of theologian Alexander Schmemmann who says that “from the beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth,” yet it is not something one can define or analyze. He adds that “One enters into joy” and I transforms endings into beginnings.¹⁴⁰

The Joy Project has been transformative. It brought an expansiveness of both vision and community. As the physical transformation of our outer campus invited inner change, we began to include more of the groups meeting on campus as part of our community, the St. George’s family. We were inspired to create a new part-time staff position called Bridge Builder. This position was inspired by the words of African American poet Audre Lorde who said that “The sharing of joy [...] forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them and lessens the threat of their difference.”¹⁴¹

One example of this was an invitation to students of a Japanese language preschool, whose students meet daily on our campus. We invited their participation in the Joy Project. Teachers

¹⁴⁰Alexander Schmemmann, For the Life of the World, *Creative Theology*, December 11, 2017, accessed December 1, 2019, <http://www.creativetheology.com/blog/2017/12/11/for-the-life-of-the-world>.

¹⁴¹Audre Lorde, *Sister, Outsider, Essays and Speeches*, rev. ed. (New York: Ten Speed Press, an imprint of Random House Crown Publishing, 2007), 56.

enthusiastically joined us, talking to 2- and 3-year-olds about joy and invited them to illustrate it.

Figs. 22 and 23 are samples of the resulting 20 crayon drawings we received.

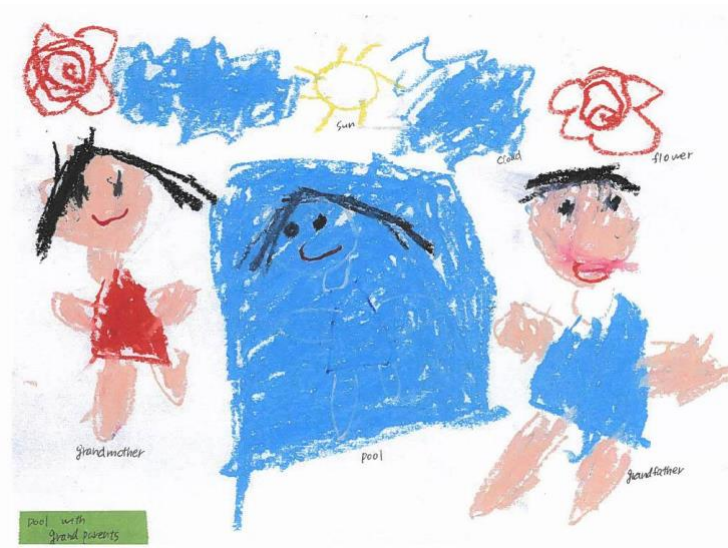


Fig. 7.1. Anonymous preschooler drawing, showing joy as family.

The drawings illustrated belonging, family, friends, connections to nature and the environment.



Fig. 7.2. Anonymous drawing by Futaba Preschool Student shows joy in relationships.

Students were not identified in any way. The drawings simply showed how preschoolers viewed joy. Their participation was not meant to be scientific, but expansive, a way to invite the participation of as many voices as possible. The energy in these images reveal the pure, untarnished joy of children.

The participation of Futaba students in our Joy Project led to additional invitations to school students for St. George's activities. These efforts illustrate the importance of Evans' "larger us"—a way of enlarging circles of belonging. The resulting good will engendered expanded my understanding of my own ministry. I began to realize that the scope of my ministry encompassed more than just the people in the pews on Sunday, but the entire campus and even beyond it.

St. George's Voices: Joyce—The Divine Creates Joy

As noted earlier, several St. George's parishioners were also invited to share their stories and their understandings of joy. For many of them, faith and joy are deeply linked with authenticity and personal narrative and the universal human desire—referenced by Nash and Viray—to make our words "signify."¹⁴² This desire includes following the instructions of Jesus to bear witness with their lives to others.¹⁴³

Joyce, a 65-year-old Indonesian American woman, currently serves as St. George's Bridge-Builder. She represents the church on several interfaith councils and at numerous community events. She was instrumental in organizing our September 14, 2019, interfaith Festival of Joy. Interfaith and ecumenical outreach are a passion for Joyce, a widowed mother of four, who believes joy sustained her while she cared for her terminally ill husband and other family members. For Joyce, joy is "the simple things, a reassuring hug, a glance of recognition

¹⁴² Nash and Viray, "Our Stories Matter," 17.

¹⁴³ Matthew 28:18-20 (NRSV).

that I was heard, understood or seen for who I am.”¹⁴⁴ According to Joyce,

Joy’s creator for me, is the Divine One, who gives me free reign to imagine endless possibilities and create enough open spaces to discover what fits and what needs course correction. Joy is living in the moment, with an eye out for exploring what new blessing is about to unfold, if I’m receptive and willing to dare greatly and trust that all will be well.¹⁴⁵

For Joyce, joy is derived from a sense of God’s presence and a belief that she is beloved by God. This belief aids her in resisting the negative forces of the culture because it “allows and invites me to celebrate all that I am, complete with foibles, missteps, mess and straight-up failing miserably.”¹⁴⁶

What follows are other voices from St. George’s, more in-depth interviews with active lay leaders whose lives mirror joy and are infectious.

Leslie – “Seeds of Hope” Bring Joy

Leslie, a petite, dark-haired human-resources professional and university instructor, was forced into early retirement by chronic illness. But her illnesses could not dim her passion for outreach, service to others, and gardening. She combines the three, by tending the St. George’s “Seeds of Hope Farm.” Regularly, she joyfully delivers fresh farm produce to the South County Outreach Food Bank.

Leslie was diagnosed with type-1 diabetes at three years old and was hospitalized for a month. She spent many hours alone, calling for her mother, fearful that laboratory technicians were “vampires coming to steal my blood.”¹⁴⁷ She was given a life expectancy of just 30 years old. Consequently, she recalls feeling an ever-present sense of her own mortality, weighing on

¹⁴⁴Joyce, St. George’s Church Bridge Builder, parishioner, email message to author, September 1, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Joyce, email.

¹⁴⁶ Joyce, email.

¹⁴⁷ Leslie, St. George’s Parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 10, 2019.

her. This sense was complicated by her need for regular injections and frequent meals. These challenges set her apart from other students, especially during her high school years, which resulted in “extreme peer pressure,” she says.

In spite of the dire predictions regarding her health, she survived. But then, at 30, Leslie was diagnosed with Charcot-Marie Tooth Syndrome (CMTS), a neurological disorder that prevents nerve impulses from reaching muscles. It begins by attacking the extremities but eventually shuts down the body’s major organs. The disease has affected her balance. Multiple surgeries have fused the bones in her feet and ankles to aid her balance. She is assisted by a walker and drives a car equipped with special hand controls.

Her own suffering sensitized her and gave her purpose, a life’s mission which the terminal diagnosis had initially diminished. She has volunteered in women’s shelters and other empowerment ministries, and she leads the church’s chapter of the Daughters of the King, a ministry of prayer and service. Recently, she organized a multi-congregation day at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. It included a trip to St. Mary’s Church in Los Angeles, the diocese’s historically Japanese American congregation. Trip participants viewed the church’s stained-glass windows, which memorialize its members’ World War II camp experiences. The day culminated in a meal together in the museum’s Chado Tea Garden restaurant.

Allan – Joy is church, and Relationship

Allan, a 66-year-old African American insurance salesman, grew up in the American Baptist Church but was recently confirmed in the Episcopal Church. He derives joy from family, friends, and church, especially because church “is accepting of everybody. When I came here, I thought this is the way church should be,” he said. “I was so happy that I just got confirmed in

the church.”¹⁴⁸

For him, that translates into showing up when needed and in giving back to the church and to those in need. He says, “I never thought I’d be in this situation, as far as being so content with my life and so joyful. Every morning I wake up with a smile on my face. I feel like I’m walking on Cloud Nine right now. St. George’s feels like a family to me.”¹⁴⁹

Mercedese – A ‘God Shot’ Brings Joy

Suffering taught service and compassion to Mercedese, the artist who painted the angel wings mural on the church’s exterior wall. Her service to others and sharing of her artistic gifts with the church bring her lasting joy.

Mercedese is one of the most visible lay leaders at St George’s. As the people’s warden—a role which involves serving on the bishop’s committee and in an advisory capacity to clergy—she offers feedback, problem-solving, and pastoral care to both. She also chairs the church’s Creative Communications Committee, which is responsible for our uniformity of message, in stationery, signage, banners and the bulletin boards erected throughout the campus. Consequently, she models joy and service to everyone. The congregation trusts and looks up to her, which she experiences, as a gift.

Joy both surprised and transformed Mercedese while she was caring for her husband, when he was dying of AIDS. Her “God Shot” happened in December, near Christmas, two decades ago. She and her husband had moved into a new apartment so she could better care for him. “We both loved Christmas,” she recalled. “For about two years, he had been unable to speak, feed or dress himself.” Because the new place felt smaller and darker,” she says, “After a

¹⁴⁸ Allan, St. George’s parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 12, 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Allan, interview.

couple of nights at the new place, I decided to go out and get a tree and I decorated it.

“When I plugged in the lights, he said ‘Christmas’. He hadn’t spoken in two years, and he never spoke again after that, but that one word, was pure joy. He died about six months later. It helped me get through his death. I call it my ‘God Shot’.”¹⁵⁰

Joshua – Joy and Happiness are Different

Joshua, a 65-year-old Chinese American, in discernment for priesthood in the Episcopal Church, believes that joy “is in everyone but it is not necessarily an easy emotion to express”—one that is often drowned out by the culture’s negativism. “Joy has nothing to do with being happy all the time,” he says. “Joy is deeper. Joy is authentic, more honest. We all possess it but we all have to constantly remind ourselves to be grateful and to choose to look at things in a more positive way because if we don’t, nobody else will for us.”¹⁵¹

He recalled joy emerging from “One of the hardest moments I have had to face [...] coming out of the closet. Spiritually and socially, I was taught that being gay was not okay,” he said. “I had heard I would be disowned by my parents. That my friends would avoid me. That society, even some churches, would be against me. Yet, the greatest day of joy I’ve ever had was when I did come out. It was a hardship that turned into a tremendous challenge and a tremendously hopeful opportunity for a joyful life.”¹⁵²

We have glimpsed pure joy through the eyes of the Futaba preschool children. Their renderings of joy—found mainly in relationship—led to an ice cream social invitation and even more joy. The collective stories of church lay leaders—whose joy has sustained them in challenging times—St. George’s began to form a new narrative, to resist together an impending

¹⁵⁰ Mercedese, St. George’s parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 2, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Joshua Wong, St. George’s multicultural missionary, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 4, 2019.

¹⁵² Joshua, interview.

threat, the El Toro Interchange Project.

Chapter 8 — A Freeway Project

“Voice has power
... sharing your story has the ability to help another.
... Voice has the power of tidal waves;
it can illuminate the night sky like a lightning storm,
and it can captivate a room when spoken from a place of truth.”

—Wind Paz-Amor
*former assistant director,
Living/Learning Center,
University of Vermont*

Another important St. George's voice is Ramona's. She is the glowing and joyful "angel" featured on the acknowledgments page of this project. She is 90 years young, a 20-something-year member of St. George's Church. She gave me permission to use both her photo and her personal, succinct definition of joy: "I've just always been a joyful person," she told me during a personal interview. "I was just born that way. I just know that I only have one day at a time and so I might as well enjoy it. It's just part of my Christian learning and I've never thought that the Lord wanted us to be sad and unhappy." She referred to 2 Samuel 6:14-22, saying "I just always remember reading about King David, dancing before the Lord."¹⁵³

Born in Sweetwater, Texas, this demure, soft-spoken petite lady said "tough joy" has sustained her through many challenges, especially when she was widowed in her 30s and became a single mother of three children, struggling to survive. Barely weighing 100 pounds, she commanded the rapt attention of a packed St. George's church hall when she addressed a particularly tense congregational gathering in June 2019.

I had organized the meeting and invited our diocesan bishop, the Rt. Rev. John Harvey Taylor, to help facilitate it. Our 'Year of Living Joyfully' had sparked lots of creative energy, which had translated into action and change. But now it felt as though fate was testing our conviction and we were being called to live joy, notwithstanding some hefty challenges.

We had learned that the El Toro Interstate-5 Freeway Project being planned by Caltrans and the Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA) to relieve local traffic congestion in our neighborhood, would very likely threaten the church's continued existence at our present location.

St. George's is located on Avenida de la Carlota, right at the southbound I-5 freeway's

¹⁵³ Ramona, St. George's parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 20, 2019.

El Toro Road exit. If, as someone exits the freeway, they make two right turns, they are literally in our parking lot. The plan to widen the freeway offered four proposals—none of which seemed to bode well for St. George’s.

Now, we had called a meeting to share the grim news with the congregation. We had assembled a team of experts who, by the grace of God, were donating their time and expertise to assist us in what was sure to be an uphill battle. Besides our Diocesan Bishop, the team included a lawyer who serves as Vice Chancellor for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. Also included was Peter, a project consultant. (His real name has been withheld to protect him professionally.) He has worked for many years with both Caltrans and the Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA) and was very familiar not only with their process, but also with their methods and mindset. Peter is donating his time and energy on behalf of the church. My initial meeting with Peter felt chilling. He expressed concern that the transportation authorities would not fully disclose the extent to which the church might be impacted by the El Toro Interchange Project.¹⁵⁴

At a specially arranged fact-finding meeting, Caltrans and OCTA officials had said their official plans avoided touching our property. We were told that they would probably only need to raise the height of a nearby sound wall and move it a few feet inside our property line. But, the sound wall is located just a few feet from the church. At least two of our other buildings sit right beside it. To move the wall closer a few feet would put it inside our sanctuary and also impact the school/office building.

Our concerns were overwhelming. There is only one way to enter and exit the campus. Naturally, we wondered if—once the project was underway—the dust, construction noise, and transportation department’s equipment storage would limit access to the campus. It could restrict

¹⁵⁴ “Peter,” transportation consultant, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, June 5, 2019.

our ability to meet on campus to worship, even to conduct church business. It could also prevent our guests from meeting there, which could be financially catastrophic to the church.

Peter also had warned that, increasingly congested traffic patterns would mean that eventually freeway expansion would claim the entire property.¹⁵⁵ We had formed a committee. Its members began attending twice-monthly city council meetings to report back about the project's progress and to make important connections with local officials. We began reaching out to local businesses that would be impacted by the El Toro project, seeking ways to partner with them. Many were unaware of its implications for their future until we met with them.

Although a challenge, the El Toro project created a huge opportunity for us to move beyond our walls and to connect with our community in a new way. Our team of experts included a consultant in real estate condemnation law and two real estate agents who had already been scouting the area for alternate locations.

Our goal for the June meeting was to inform the congregation of what we had learned and how we had assessed the project's impact. We had to tell them that our best, daring, most proactive plan, was to move—to preserve the church, not only for us but also for future generations. Our plan was to try to find a way to work with Caltrans and OCTA to build us a new campus or to repurpose an existing one for us at current real estate market value. I did not expect the congregation to be receptive to this plan.

So, in the year that marked the 50th anniversary of the dedication of our current church building, I called a meeting to tell the congregation that our best option for the future seemed to be to leave behind the space they loved.

¹⁵⁵ "Peter," interview.

And that we, like Abraham and Sarah and our other spiritual ancestors, were being asked to journey into an unknown wilderness.

The Best-Laid Plans

The possibility of starting up all over again someplace else felt both terrifying and exhilarating. Such a move would be all-consuming, potentially solving many of the challenges associated with an aging and deteriorating campus infrastructure. Wiped out hopefully would be (hopefully) the crippling mortgage and other debt that, more than once, had forced us to borrow money from congregational “angels” in order to meet payroll.

We could creatively design a new space reflective of who we are today, a multi-use space for worship but also to help further our mission. This could include showers for the homeless, space to feed the hungry and to expand our “Seeds of Hope Farm” and perhaps to discover additional opportunities to welcome our neighbors. Our current location is directly across the street from a senior retirement community. In a new setting—depending upon location—we could potentially also attract young families moving into the area.

I was especially concerned about the impact this news would have on the congregation, a majority of whom are older and very attached to traditional church and church buildings. A recent Pew survey indicated that, almost half—48 percent—of those aged 65 and older, attend church regularly, and that 65 percent say religion is very important to them.¹⁵⁶

Other studies have indicated that spirituality creates a sense of meaning and coherence in one’s life that becomes especially important during the final stages of human development. Some social psychologists have suggested that religion helps soothe fear and insecurity about one’s

¹⁵⁶ Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America’s changing religious landscape,” *Pew Forum*, October 17, 2019, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

own mortality that becomes more important to people as they age.¹⁵⁷ Other studies have shown that organized religion appears to greatly positively impact the mental health of the elderly.

Religion provides them with a sense of belonging, and established community.¹⁵⁸

When I have done spontaneous surveys —"a show of hands, please"—about moving our 8 a.m. worship time or changing its liturgy from traditional to contemporary language, the response has been a resounding “No changes.” The same is true for efforts to combine our 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. services. The “eight o’clockers” do not want to come to church at 9 a.m. or even at 9:30 a.m. It is too late, they tell me. As for the “ten o’clockers,” who sometimes get a slow start in the mornings, 9 a.m. or even 9:30 a.m. seems way too early.

So, what would such a move—or even news of a possible move—mean for the congregation? And I battled that nagging, overarching fear that seems to dog St. George’s and that has been proved true with every change. Would this make even more people leave? How would such a possible move impact the congregation’s sense of emotional security? How would it impact their faith?

The impact on the church’s finances was also a concern. The reality of being a parish priest in these trying times is that congregations often operate from a consumer mentality, even toward church. Given that I am concerned about keeping the lights on and the trees trimmed, I worried about what would happen to the current capital campaign once members heard this news. Would they wonder why they should donate to a “doomed” place? Such concerns raised challenging questions about the efficacy of our upcoming 2020 stewardship drive.

We are in the second year of a two-year capital campaign to raise \$100,000 to help fix

¹⁵⁷ Lawrence P. White, “Why are Old People so Religious?” *Psychology Today* (February 16, 2016), accessed November 21, 2019, (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culture-conscious/201602/why-are-old-people-so-religious>).

¹⁵⁸ White, “Why are Old People so Religious?”

leaky roofs, to tent our three main buildings (church, hall, school/office) for termites, and to replace broken air conditioning units and a fire protection system limping along on life support. There had been enthusiasm initially. But, in the second year, that enthusiasm seemed to have waned and we hadn't met our goal.

As tensions soared and tempers flared at the meeting, our “angel” Ramona, with her 90-year-old infinite mother wisdom, rose to speak at the microphone, defying all age-related projections, polls, and so-called statistical norms. Her mighty presence, in a sense, called the meeting back to order.

“I love St. George’s,” she said. “I’ve been going to church here as long as I can remember. This is my family. But you know what? The church isn’t the building. It is us. And wherever we go, we’ll be church. St. George’s has moved before. We can move again, and we’ll be just fine. We’ve got each other.”¹⁵⁹

And somehow the energy in the room shifted and suddenly people were calm again, nodding in agreement. Allan, a member of the church for only a few years, and a truly joyful person, spoke next. “I agree with Ramona,” he said. “Whatever we need to do to stay together, we’ll do together. Whatever you need, Rev. Pat, we’ve got your back.”¹⁶⁰

The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength

This freeway project seemed to propose almost a testing—a time in the wilderness—for St. George’s. Could we truly live joyfully, as we proclaimed, amid such challenges and uncertainty? Would we be able, as Moltmann says, to sing the Lord’s song, not as if in a strange land but sing it joyously, wherever we are because we are secure in the Lord’s presence.¹⁶¹ St.

¹⁵⁹ Ramona, public forum, St. George’s Church, June 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Allan, public forum, St. George’s Church, June 2019.

¹⁶¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1973), 26.

George's future seemed stark. Could we reflect "joy notwithstanding?"¹⁶² How would we respond to the poignant question posed by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "How can we use this as something positive?"¹⁶³

¹⁶² Thompson, "Reflections on Joy in the Bible," 29.

¹⁶³ Dalai Lama with Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016), 224.

Chapter 9 — Opened Hearts, Opened Eyes

“Open your eyes to the goodness,
to what is good in your life and in the lives of others.”

—Miroslav Volf

There have been many challenges throughout this “Year of St. George’s Joyful Living.” As the year progressed, we began to view and respond to these challenges as opportunities for engagement. Some of them are presented here in an itemized format for the sake of clarity. The general categories are included as both challenges and opportunities for deeper community and engagement. We recognized them, to paraphrase Volf, when we opened our eyes to joy and looked around us.

Declining Membership

The Challenge: Like many other mainline Protestant denominational congregations, St. George’s has experienced a decline in membership. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey indicated that the number of adults identifying as Christians continues to decline, while those who identify as “nones” or having no faith affiliation, has grown.¹⁶⁴ More specific to us, the Episcopal Church in the United States has also experienced an overall drop in membership and average worship attendance in the last few years.¹⁶⁵

St. George’s membership decline has been due, in large part, to member deaths, relocations, or because some people are no longer physically able to attend church because of ill health or other age-related issues. Some of the decline occurred because of changing internal and external circumstances, previously noted.

The Opportunity – Average Weekly Engagement

The Rev. Anna Carmichael, a clergy colleague in the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin, had shared her approach to reframing the traditional weekly attendance count that seems to cast

¹⁶⁴ Pew Forum, “Decline of Christianity Continues,” October 17, 2019, accessed December 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Gryboski, “Episcopal Church Sees Greater Drop in Membership in 2018”, *The Christian Post*, September 5, 2019.

churches as winners and losers. Hyper-emphasis on declining attendance once prompted former Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori to label that focus a kind of idolatry. Carmichael, San Joaquin Canon to the Ordinary, prefers to focus instead on Average Weekly Engagement (AWE) rather than the traditional barometer of a church's health, Average Sunday Attendance (ASA). Many vibrant churches have few members but do incredible mission and ministry.¹⁶⁶

As *Culture Care* author Fujimura has noted, such hyper-focus, as on the ASA, has deleterious effects on a congregation. Similarly, Warner and Wilder write in *Rare Leadership*

Mature leadership is needed now more than ever. Terror, trafficking, and hate fill the airways. Imagine the difference in a church run by leaders who suffer well and help their people live with joy in the midst of hardship, and a church run by leaders who measure success in terms of Sunday morning attendance.¹⁶⁷

St. George's ASA ranges between 100-120 with two Sunday services, while our AWE is upwards of two thousand students and community members, who visit our campus each week. If we consider our outreach ministries—Laundry Love, the Hands of Grace Soup Kitchen, a worship service held at a local retirement community, the UC-Irvine student feeding ministry, and partnerships with South County Outreach, interfaith alliances and other local nonprofit agencies—we engage another thousand people easily per week. St. George's is doing incredible mission and ministry!

Diversity and Demographics

The Challenge: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said nearly 60 years ago, “it is

¹⁶⁶ The Rev. Canon Anna Carmichael (Canon to the Ordinary, Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin), interviewed by Pat McCaughan, May 6, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Wilder and Warner, *Rare Leadership*, 191.

appalling the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning.”¹⁶⁸ This remains true today, although it extends beyond racial and ethnic affiliation, increasingly to include age and the political polarization of religious organizations.¹⁶⁹ St. George’s congregation is primarily Anglo, with an average age of about 70, a few young families, a handful of Asian-Americans, African-Americans and Latino-Americans. Table 1 includes a demographic comparison of St. George’s church members, our campus visitors and the remainder of Orange County.¹⁷⁰

Table 1. St. George’s, Orange County Demographics			
Ethnicity	Orange County	St. George’s on Sundays	Campus Visitors
Anglo	40.4	79	62
Hispanic	34.3	7	10
Asian, Pacific Islander	20.5	6	16
2 or More Races	2.89	--	--
Black	1.64	6	6
Native American & Alaskan	.18	--	--
Other	.139	2	6

Table 1. A comparison of ethnicities among Orange County, St. George’s church and its campus visitors.

Orange County has a population of about 3.2 million, with growth anticipated mainly among seniors.¹⁷¹ While this projection mirrors national and state trends, it is even more pronounced in Orange County, raising serious concerns. For example, the *Orange County Indicators Report for 2019* specifically noted that “the fewer people of working age, the fewer

¹⁶⁸ God’s Fingerprints. 11 Powerful Martin Luther King Quotes (January 16, 2017), accessed November 21, 2019, <https://godsfingerprints.co/blogs/blog/10-of-the-best-martin-luther-king-quotes>.

¹⁶⁹ Bruce Bower, “U.S. Religion is Increasingly Polarized: Moderate forms of worship are losing ground while evangelicalism maintains a steady foothold,” *Science News*, December 14, 2017, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/us-religion-increasingly-polarized>.

¹⁷⁰ Table 1. St. George’s Staff, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, December 12, 2019.

¹⁷¹ *Orange County Community Indicators Report for 2019*, accessed December 1, 2019, https://www.ocbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CommIndicators_Report_091219-WEB.pdf

there are to sustain schools, pensions and other supports to the youngest and oldest members of a population.” The report estimates that, by 2040, the burden on the average working age resident to financially support the dependent population will grow from 60 dependent age residents for every 100 working age residents to 79 for every 100.

The Opportunity:

By recognizing St. George’s demographics within our larger context, we can begin to reach out more expansively. The opportunity exists to create Evans’ “larger us” circles of members and guests. I am hoping to engage more directly with Spanish speakers, Asian-Americans, youth and young adults as well as seniors.

Spanish-speakers are the second-largest ethnic group in Orange County but rank third in terms of the frequency of their presence on the St. George’s campus. With the addition of bilingual Spanish-English event planning and facilities staff, we hope to grow this population, through marketing our church hall for specific cultural events as well as interfaith and social activities.

Asians and Asian-Americans are the second-fastest-growing ethnic group in Orange County. They also represent the second-largest ethnic group presence on the St. George’s campus. Based on data obtained through our diocesan headquarters, we believe second-generation Asian-Americans are trending away from the churches of their youth and are seeking faith experiences like the Episcopal Church that offer creative liturgy, inclusivity, tolerance, community activism, and social justice.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Bishop Diane Bruce, Suffragan Bishop of Los Angeles, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 2019.

In response, earlier this year, we had created a new part-time Ministry Developer position at the church in the hopes of reaching out to local Asian-Americans. This new role was designed to connect with the local Asian-American community and, through partnerships, discern their needs and possibilities for ministry. Unfortunately, after three months, a schedule conflict forced the ministry developer to resign the position. The role has since gone unfilled and although we learned and strengthened that community in the process, we are re-evaluating the approach and focus of such a ministry.

Finding ways to incorporate youth and young adults into our community has also been a challenge for St. George's. Youth and young adults have the smallest representation of any church or campus group. They are present largely—in addition to the weekday campus schools—for afterschool extracurricular and community groups. In 2019 as part of the Joy Project, we tried two approaches to connect with them. We replaced the last two pews on both sides of the church with child-size tables, so youngsters can be creative during worship. These tables are outfitted with materials to engage children that are coordinated with the Sunday lectionary. These included coloring books, crayons, and other art supplies.

We and two other local Episcopal churches also began a partnership with the Episcopal chaplain at UC-Irvine, to create a stronger presence on their campus. St. George's role is to support food-insecure students. Working alongside the campus student food pantry, we help to provide sandwiches weekly to students. These sandwiches are labeled with the chaplaincy's contact info and a "save-the-date" reminder for a monthly Saturday evening dinner we have started at a nearby Methodist church. We developed a relationship with the University Methodist Church because of its close proximity to the campus and together we have begun hosting

monthly dinners there. These dinners are student-organized and led, with a coffeehouse atmosphere. Plans are in the works to increase the monthly meals to weekly dinners in 2020.

Seniors continue to represent our largest population, both in Orange County and at St. George's, a trend that is expected to continue. While we count a substantial number of seniors among our congregation, we also offer a monthly worship service at a senior residence. It has been so well-received that the Activities Director called me up in a panic, wondering if we could come an extra week to do an Easter service, because the residents were clamoring for one. We agreed, and our Lay Eucharistic Visitors even took gift crosses for them. I hope to replicate that service in other senior residences, as well as to hold a worship service at Laguna Woods Village, which is just across the street from the church.

We are still considering other ways to reach out to our neighbors, based on information from an Executive InSite demographic report. This report offers information about the religious preferences of residents within a three-mile radius of the church. The data is compiled through the census and Experian and compares local attitudes about religion and religious/spiritual programs, to the rest of the country. It is an opportunity to know a little bit more about our neighbors. In Orange County, only two categories ranked above the national average: bible study/prayer groups, and friendly encounters.¹⁷³

Nearby residents cared most—according to the data—about warm, friendly encounters, quality preaching, bible study/prayer groups and traditional worship, in that order. The report also indicated that our neighbors are interested in worship and community events, as well as outreach.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ The Executive InSite Report compiled for the Diocese of Los Angeles for Zip Code 92653, August 24, 2016.

¹⁷⁴ The Executive InSite Report.

Resisting Challenge, Embracing Opportunity

St. George's has been challenged to embrace opportunities that both deepen our own relationships with one another and that continue to increase ministry beyond our borders. Robin Meyers has noted that, "Every pastor knows the seven last words of the Church: 'We've never done it that way before'." ¹⁷⁵ Meyers says

that not all churches are going to make it, of course. But far more would not only survive but prosper if they would just consider practicing the gospel's own radical equation: *we gain our lives by losing them*. We plant seeds and then we trust the process of germination over which we have no control. ¹⁷⁶

Research has indicated that as people age, they lose an adaptability brain circuit, which may explain why the elderly have a harder time coping with change. ¹⁷⁷ As the brain circuit—the striatum—ages, it deteriorates, reducing its activity. As activity is reduced, so is the ability to develop new strategies to meet goals.

St. George's large percentage of older adults in the congregation may explain the reluctance to try something new. But it seems to be a function of the church in general. My approach has been to try to apply the Fujimura genesis response. In other words, we need to create opportunities for joy and to see where they take us. Typically, "genesis moments" create ongoing generative moments—bursts of creative energy and excitement, momentum and joy, deepen community and recall for us our baptismal covenant. Fujimura argues that, in this way, "we must all co-create joy. We must all become stewards of the culture." ¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2012), 176.

¹⁷⁶ Meyers, *Underground Church*, 145.

¹⁷⁷ Anna Salleh, "Brain Circuit that helps us Adapt to Change Fades with Age, study finds," *ABC News*, April 20, 2016, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2016-04-21/brain-circuit-that-helps-us-adapt-to-change-fades-with-age/7342736>.

¹⁷⁸ Fujimura, *Culture Care*, 140.

Developing a core group of effective lay leaders has helped in this process. They are leaders who are willing to dare bravely, to be creative, and to invite others to take a chance. They are also adept communicators, skilled at keeping people informed. Together, we've attempted to telegraph the message that, "You matter." Not everything we have tried has worked, but we have learned a great deal. We have made new friends, met new neighbors, and gained new insights and ideas for our next efforts. I was reminded of this when a gentleman—a first-time guest to our campus—knocked on my office door one morning, just to say that the campus has "great energy."

Meyers proposes that churches invest some of that kind of energy, into their communities, to germinate.

People begin to come to us, but not to be inoculated. Strangely, they wish to catch this virus, to be exposed to this highly contagious notion that either all of us matter or none of us do [...] it is remarkable that in the church, of all institutions, there is much resistance to change.¹⁷⁹

Perhaps it is helpful for us to remember that Jesus was always about change—changed hearts, changed minds, changed rules, changed health statuses, changed lives. "If we are not doing mission," says Meyers, "then for what purpose are we 'saving' ourselves? Wouldn't it be better to die pushing out than to die circling the wagons? Wouldn't you rather be digging in your garden when the world ends than cowering in a fallout shelter?"¹⁸⁰

Increasing Polarization

The Challenge: Our country's extreme political polarization has filtered down to local congregations like ours. St. George's is nestled in the heart of South Orange County, once a key

¹⁷⁹ Meyers, *Underground Church*, 175.

¹⁸⁰ Meyers, *Underground Church*, 175.

Republican Party stronghold and center of California's political conservatism. But the county voted Democratic in the 2018 mid-term elections. St. George's congregation is about evenly split along major political party lines. Which is to say that at times, especially depending on the news cycle, tensions run high. There are parishioners who refuse to speak to one another or even exchange the Peace with one another during worship because of conflict over their political views. This impacts the quality of life for the entire community.

The amount of pastoral care needed with parishioners who are upset over one another's Facebook posts has increased dramatically, especially regarding political views. A frequent question that I get is: "How can I smile at them, or make small talk when everything they stand for is everything I oppose?"

The Opportunity: Truth-Telling, Bridge-Building, Baptismal Covenant

Political differences, particularly since the 2016 election, have presented an opportunity for curiosity and engagement. Why do we feel the way we do? What issues influence our votes? Does viewing society through the lens of my baptismal covenant make a difference? How do we love those with whom we differ?

Engaging in difficult conversations has helped me to understand the answers to some of these questions and to begin to address them. Overwhelmingly, concerns seem to focus around fear and distrust of the other, most specifically Muslims and undocumented persons. The 2015 terror attack in San Bernardino, although four years ago, still is very fresh, and some voiced support for the administration's Muslim ban.

I address these fears individually and collectively through preaching. The Word of God is as powerful and forceful today as it was in Nehemiah's time. The Word of God has liberated Hebrew slaves from captivity. Its power inspired Dietrich Bonhoeffer to resist the Nazis, even to

the point of death. This word strengthened Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to help move Black people from the back of the bus to cafeteria counters and into the voting booths. Similarly, it propelled Desmond Tutu, to convince the world to stand against apartheid and also to preside over forgiveness in its aftermath. So there is no doubt that the word of God can help free us from our divisions today. I believe that with all my heart.

Preaching about those I encounter while reporting about society's challenges also enables me to authentically describe those experiences. I frequently witness firsthand these challenges—standing in line in the sweltering heat at a border crossing in Calexico with a Mexican family of four who had been granted asylee status but were being refused entry into the country. Or listening to the dangers faced by a Salvadoran teenager who at 13, courageously risked death in the desert to get to California. Often my congregation is unaware of the extreme personal toll such struggles take. Hearing these stories has the power to change us.

I also urge parishioners to vote their morals, not their political parties. I offer frequent reminders of those countercultural promises we make in baptism to “seek and serve Christ in all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves,” to strive for justice and peace on the earth, respecting the dignity of every human being,” and to renounce all the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.¹⁸¹

Through our part-time Bridge-Builder position we have joined local interfaith councils and explored opportunities for service together. On May 19, 2019, St. George's hosted an Interfaith Forum titled “When Our Faiths are Threatened by Intolerance and Incivility.” The featured panelists besides me were Rabbi Heather Miller of Temple Beth El of South Orange County and Sheikh Tarik Ata of the Orange County Islamic Foundation. The forum drew about 40 people

¹⁸¹ The Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Corp. 1979), 305.

from a range of faith expressions. One of the most startling revelations that day was hearing from both my Jewish and Muslim counterparts about the amount of time and attention they must give to the safety and security of their staff and flock. Both reported substantial increases in the number of threats they receive daily, compared to previous years. They declined, for obvious reasons, to discuss the security measures they have taken in response to these threats.

This forum helped to deepen relationships and to offer hope for future gatherings and future partnerships. The St. George's "Festival of Joy" held in September was one such gathering. Also, this effort has continued with the St. George's 2020 Lenten Program, a series of Wednesday evening soup suppers featuring interfaith guest speakers, titled "Spirited Suppers." We hope that—in these highly polarized times—our efforts can begin to restore trust and create new opportunities for sharing our stories with one another.

Conclusion: Celebration

“Joy Unspeakable
erupts when you least expect it
when the burden is greatest,
when the hope is gone,
after bullets fly,
It rises on the crest of impossibility,
it sways to the rhythm of steadfast hearts,
and celebrates what we cannot see.”

—Barbara A. Holmes,
Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church,

Interfaith Festival of Joy – “A Sweet Reminder”

The Interfaith Forum inspired us to host a Festival of Joy in September. The festival’s aim, in the words of Joyce, St. George’s Bridge-BUILDER, was to express joy and love in an open-hearted manner, untethered by expectations or demands.

Our interfaith partners responded enthusiastically. Everyone was in absolute agreement about what it needed: God, food, music, dance, the arts, relationship. When Joyce proposed the idea to several of the local interfaith councils that St. George’s attends, she was surprised by the excitement and energy created. According to Joyce

As each (council) person shared their resounding yes, it felt like a blessing to [...] acknowledge joy in our lives in the midst of all the current uncertainty, chaos, pain and challenges in the culture today. It was a sweet reminder that when I keep my eyes and heart open to joy, it is always within reach. That it is as close as holding a hand, reaching out to a friend, always just a prayer away.¹⁸²

We viewed inviting others to participate in joy as our resistance to a culture which, as



Fig. 24, *The Festival of Joy announcement used to market the event to the local community. Created by Mercedes Bantz for St. George's, used with permission.*

¹⁸² Joyce, interview.

previously noted, is not life-giving. We wanted to infect God’s own creative joy into the very air we breathe! Participants were invited to bring a prayer, a poem, a reading, or to dance, to sing, and to bring foods that would generate joy. St. George’s hosted the September 14 festival, and invited the interfaith community. We developed a flyer for publicity (see fig. 24). In an attempt to reach out to the entire community, we publicized the festival in local media, and among church groups. Some local merchants—partners we had developed through our freeway project activism—donated food. Participants brought their own joyful foods, including tabbouleh to Southern cheese grits, stuffed grape leaves to sweet and sour meatballs, as well as salad, sandwiches and double chocolate brownies.

Musical offerings ranged from Beethoven to hip hop. There was sacred text and humorous verse. About 50 people participated, including members from a variety of Protestant denominations, as well as interfaith partners from the Baha’i, Jewish, and Muslim traditions.

Cynthia – Music is a Happiness that Radiates from Inside Out

Cynthia, a lyric soprano from the St. George’s choir and a professional singer, performed *Colors of the Wind*. “What I find about joy is the connections we have with each other,” she said when introducing it. “Many years ago, I was asked to sing this song professionally. It was so joyous. My three-year-old daughter saw me, climbed down from her dad’s lap, and somehow was helped onto the stage. She sang it with me, at the top of her lungs. The audience loved her. It was a moment that brought so much joy, like today.”¹⁸³

Cynthia has shared much of her own experience of joy, which is intricately connected to her musical performances and her service to others. “Joy for me is music,” says Cynthia, who has waged a six-year battle against stage-4 breast cancer. “[Music] is a happiness that radiates

¹⁸³ Cynthia, St. George’s parishioner, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, September 2019.

from the inside out. My faith takes me to a place where I believe I'm going to be well cared for."¹⁸⁴ She recalled that even facing a double mastectomy in April 2013, "I felt protected." That sense has continued as she resisted medical assumptions. It gave her the strength to advocate for her own care. "Doctors were saying, this is protocol, and I'm sitting in parking lots, crying, acknowledging that something is telling me that their protocol isn't going to work." Although several doctors said she didn't need a bone scan performed, she had one anyway, and it revealed the cancer was much more advanced than doctors had believed. "The cancer was already in my skull, my spine. It was discovered in the nick of time to clean it out and get it away from my brain," she said.¹⁸⁵

She finds strength in church community and joy in giving back through her music. "You just live every day to know that you're hopeful, that there are some tomorrows and people will remember you as a good person and someone they enjoyed. It's an inside-out kind of thing. It's important, to keep joyfulness in your heart. Once you lose that, you've lost a lot."¹⁸⁶

The Rev. Tom Chesley – Share Your Joy with Somebody Today

Another Festival of Joy participant was the Rev. Thomas Chesley, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lake Forest, who offered an eschatological hip hop message, concluding with the idea that we will experience

unspeakable joy ... in the midst of trials and suffering. Here we come with light. Here we come with joy. Here we come with the good word that the Lord knows. The Lord sees, and he will answer this prayer. Here we come, ushering in hope and it's the people of God with joy. Joy to the world. Joy to the world is what we say. Today we decided to have joy, the kind of joy the world does not give and the world cannot take away. Share your joy with somebody today.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Cynthia, interview.

¹⁸⁵ Cynthia, interview.

¹⁸⁶ Cynthia, interview.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Chesley, Second Baptist Church, Lake Forest, Festival of Joy participant, September 14, 2019.

Rabbi Joe – Yentl and a Lived Ethic of Joy

Rabbi Joe Mendelsohn, a chaplain at the Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) recalled the joy through resistance in the well-known tale, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Summarizing the story of the main character Tevye’s joyfulness and efforts to maintain traditions in resistance to a hostile culture, he said joy is the ethic by which Jewish people have lived for centuries. “We look for joy in everything we do,” Mendelsohn said, adding that celebrations like the Joy Festival are observed “for every life cycle. Every event is an excuse for a party, an excuse to get together and enjoy ourselves and to celebrate whatever’s going on.”¹⁸⁸

Iman – A Muslim Prayer of Joy and Protection

Iman represented the Orange County Islamic Foundation, a public and private school educator and closed the gathering with the words she uses to bless her children morning and evening. She believes it is a prayer of protection. She chose the prayer because she believes people are questioning God’s existence and that “that is what is truly taking joy out of our hearts and homes and relationships.”¹⁸⁹ She offered the prayer, first in English, then in Arabic

God there is no God but He, the living, the eternal. No slumber
can seize Him, nor sleep. His are all things in heaven and on earth.
Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permits?
His knowledge is before and after. Nor shall they compass anything
without His knowledge except as He wills. His throne extends over
the heavens and on earth and He feels no fatigue in regarding,
preserving them. For He is the Most High, the Supreme in glory.¹⁹⁰

Mike – Continue to Have a Joyful Day

In closing, Mike, the St. George’s Bishop’s Warden who served as master of ceremonies, said

¹⁸⁸ Joe Mendelsohn, retired rabbi, Festival of Joy, September 14, 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Iman Saymeh, educator, participant, Festival of Joy.

¹⁹⁰ Iman, Festival of Joy.

“We hope this is the beginning of many such gatherings. Joy within each of us and around us. So, enjoy the food, check out our campus and above all else, continue to have a joyful day.”¹⁹¹ He invited guests to take photos of themselves at the angel wings mural, to walk the labyrinth, to pause and zip-tie a heartfelt desire to the prayer tree.

An Interfaith Joy Survey

A survey of festival participants yielded 16 responses, about a 30 percent response rate. Some questions were similar to those in the other survey; others sought to elicit the possibilities of moving forward to develop a broader-based community of story and joy.

At least 50 percent of those responding identified their understanding of God and experiences of the presence of God as joy; about 69 percent connected joy, their faith and God with an ethic of living. One respondent commented: “Joy is the true expression of God’s love in your heart, shared with others. Also, being the true person with specific gifts that God has intended you to shine with and serve others.”¹⁹²

Another response was: “Joy is nurtured in the reciprocal relationship of church, feeding me spiritually, and me, ministering in a way that shows our community the love of Christ.”¹⁹³ Nearly equal numbers, 10.5 percent, believed that actively incorporating joy, actively choosing it in their lives, improved their relationships with God and themselves. Even more, 15.8 percent felt it improved their relationships with others and inspired them to acts of service on behalf of others. Of course, it bears noting that another 10.5 percent said it made no difference, or that they were not really sure or did not really know if it made a difference.

In the results of this survey, joy was most often related to relationships, family, church,

¹⁹¹ Mike, St. George’s senior warden, Festival of Joy.

¹⁹² Festival of Joy Survey, Question 2, Participant 3.

¹⁹³ Festival of Joy Survey, Question 3, Participant 1.

worship and the creative arts. I am not sure I can draw many, if any, conclusions from the responses. It does raise a question about how to incorporate—or if churches could consider incorporating—more art, music, dance and theater in worship and common life.

Overall, a majority of those responding said they would welcome future gatherings grounded in joy that includes a wide variety of faiths, ethnicities, and people. Several remarks included the theme of acceptance and tolerance “of all people with all points of view. Support and positive mentoring of all people—encouragement of people goals.”¹⁹⁴ Another, similar comment was: “One without pettiness, hate. A community that supported and encouraged one another despite any differences they may have.”¹⁹⁵ An overwhelming 75 percent said that yes, they would attend a gathering focused on joyful participation. One person said no, and three were a maybe. That feels hopeful, also. One person noted that true joy comes from within. Another said: “Yes. We can’t have too much joy.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Festival of Joy Survey, Question 7, Participant 3.

¹⁹⁵ Festival of Joy Survey, Question 7, Participant 8.

¹⁹⁶ Festival of Joy Survey, Question 8, Participant 12.

Postscript: Deep Community

“And what is deep community?
It is the process of finding joy—much joy!
Together.”

—Paul Born,
Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times

The St. George's Labyrinth (see fig. 25) is part of our campus identity. It serves as a metaphor



Fig. 25. St. George's Campus Labyrinth is another invitation to visitors to deepen their spiritual joy.

for our Year of Joyful Living. There is a parallel between labyrinths, and the transformation happening at St. George's. According to Caroline Adams, labyrinths are

all about change, growth, discovery, movement, transformation, continuously expanding your vision of what is possible, stretching your soul, learning to see clearly and deeply, listening to your intuition, taking courageous challenges at every step along the way [...] You are on a path [...] exactly where you are meant to be right now [...] And from here, you can only go forward, shaping your life story into a magnificent tale of triumph, of healing, of courage, of beauty, of wisdom, of power, of dignity, and of love.¹⁹⁷

St. George's Year of Joyful Living has been all about change, growth, discovery, transformation and seeking to expand a vision of what is possible. According to Fujimura, such efforts are desperately needed. His critical assessment seems dire for the church. Fujimura believes that the church may have "kept the structure of truth, but we have largely lost touch with the Spirit in creating beauty." His provocative question is a troubling one to consider, "What do

¹⁹⁷ Caroline Adams, Lessons 4 Living, *The Labyrinth*, accessed December 2019, <http://www.lessons4living.com/labyrinth.htm>.

we do in a culture in which the church is viewed as only a lifeless structural memory of the moral underpinnings that keep the world from falling apart?”¹⁹⁸ To that St. George’s answers a resounding, Choose Joy! Or, to quote a survey respondent, we “cannot have too much joy!”¹⁹⁹

A good friend and colleague, Tim, observed that the church’s resistance to change and to new ideas is part of the brain’s tendency toward negativity. A new idea is proposed, and energy is focused on all the reasons that idea will not work. Tim said he views his role as breaking through all those reasons.²⁰⁰

Breaking through resistance to change happens through telling our stories, trusting a collective willingness to resist despair and division. This “culture care” begins with truly living our baptismal covenant, with acknowledging our brokenness and creating, as Fujimura writes

a safe space for truth telling. But it does not stop there. It starts with listening and then invites people toward, beauty, wholeness and healing. As we become able to acknowledge the truth of our situation and can tell that story, we are encouraged to move into caring for ... participants in the culture, into creating contexts for deeper conversation, into fostering spiritual growth, and sometimes into problem solving.²⁰¹

Not only must we all become bridge builders, but we must also dare bravely to become boundary crossers, learning fluency in and acceptance of one another’s pain and joy.

Common ground and opportunities for joy include faith, the arts, and relational joy. As Wilder and Warner have noted, “Every time people are glad to be together and withstand adversity, their joy-strength grows, and their emotional capacity becomes greater.” They conclude that relational joy is the natural means for growing a strong, resilient mind.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Fujimura, *Culture Care*, 78.

¹⁹⁹ St. George’s Joy Survey, Question 8, Participant 12.

²⁰⁰ Tim Alderson, Diocese of Los Angeles Seeds of Hope Director, interviewed by Pat McCaughan, June 2019.

²⁰¹ Fujimura, *Culture Care*, 46.

²⁰² Warner and Wilder, *Rare Leadership*, 65.

Although St. George's faced many deferred maintenance challenges, I believe our year of joyful living deepened community. One indication might be that, not only did we meet our capital campaign goal of \$100,000, we exceeded it. So we created another opportunity for shared joy, by throwing a big, celebratory party! We gave away 100 Grand candy bars as party favors. The church, hall and school/office building have been tented for termites, the repairs on all the roofs have been completed, and new air conditioning and heating units have been installed.

We have also exceeded our "St. George's NOW" stewardship goal of \$225,000, for the first time in my five years as vicar. Previously, we were forced to organize "close the gap" campaigns because stewardship goals came up short. There are fewer people giving, but they are giving more. And we've adopted, again, as our theme for 2020, St. George's NOW!

In summary, this year's journey began with the word of God, and by recalling our own identities in Christ. We reclaimed the legacy of daring spiritual ancestors. We are awakening again to who and what we have always been. A violinist friend describes this transformation with the metaphor of a river, always flowing. If we are lucky, if we are blessed, she says, we can hope just to step into it from time to time. Before performances, she and other musicians often say to one another, meet me at the river.

A few days ago, while in my office, a teacher and several students from one of the schools sharing our campus, gathered for a break on the circle of couches placed outside my office door. They were sitting on the couches added this year, as a sign of hospitality to those who visit the campus. They intend to send a message of welcome, comfort, belonging, sharing, caring—that St. George's is an oasis of peace, a place of respite, just to be and to breathe in joy in a polarized culture. The teacher strummed a ukulele, and sang with her students, the words to

the song, “I’ve got peace like a river I’ve got peace like a river in my soul.”

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has said that the peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there.²⁰³ Those energetic, melodious young voices, still resound in my mind, surprising me with joy. Daily, I recall those voices, as a kind of momentary retreat, immersing myself in the experience. I also recall an image of the river in the Book of Revelation, the river that flows through the streets of heaven, “straight from the throne of God”.²⁰⁴

To choose joy is to make a heavenly choice. St. George’s message is clear: we invite everyone to meet us at the river.

Share Your Joy with Somebody Today

Ultimately, by choosing to focus a year of our lives on joy, St. George’s members chose deeper community and new possibilities for connection and relationship. Born says the onus is on each of us, as individuals, as groups and as a nation, to choose between shallow community, fear-based community or deep community. To do so is to know that “I am home.”²⁰⁵

In 2019, our Year of Living Joyfully, we shared our stories, laughed, cried, enjoyed, and took care of one another. We worked together for a better community and a better world. We have expanded our understandings of community and daringly braved new endeavors. We have glimpsed who we are in God’s creative energy. Parishioners are now actively seeking joy. And while we don’t yet know what the El Toro Interchange Project will mean ultimately for the future of St. George’s, we are facing the NOW of our lives, confident that, whatever the future may bring, we will face it together, sustained by joy. We may need, like our spiritual ancestor Abraham, to leave behind all that is familiar and go in search of a land God will show us.

²⁰³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), 20.

²⁰⁴ Revelation 22:1-6 (NRSV).

²⁰⁵ Born, *Deepening Community*, 56.

In the meantime, we will continue to seek opportunities to share joy, to forge new community partnerships, to experience more deeply existing ones. And we will continue to lean on the everlasting arms of Jesus. Ellen Charry,²⁰⁶ Moltmann, Volf—as well as Augustine and Aquinas before them—have all said that the mission of the church is to cultivate joy among God’s people.²⁰⁷ We are fulfilling that mission.

God’s power turns our mourning, sadness, anxiety, fear into dancing. So, we danced. Our “angel” Ramona, and a whole group of us, gathered in St. George’s hall, at our Spirit Dance event in late September. Moving to the right, then to the left, with the music’s beat, arms locked together and chanting, “Thy light is in all beings. Thy love is in all beings. Thy joy surrounds us all.” Winded, Ramona moved to quit the dance, to rest. But we grabbed a chair and seated her in the very center, in the midst of the circle. We joined hands again, moving first to the right, then to the left, with the music’s beat. Our arms were locked together as we sang to her, to one another, to everyone with ears to hear, to all creation, to God, who created us all in joy: “Thy light is in all beings. Thy love is in all beings. Thy joy surrounds us all.”

And Ramona’s face, in the midst of us all: shone with pure joy.

²⁰⁶ Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 32.

²⁰⁷ Volf and Crisp, “What is Joy?”, 129.

Appendix 1



Joy: A Questionnaire

How do you define Joy?

What is your understanding of Joy in the Bible?

In what ways does this understanding inform your approach to life?

What difference do you believe it makes that you have/have not incorporated joy in your life?

Where do you see or feel joyfulness displayed at St. George's?

Where (or how) would you like to see joyfulness at St. George's?

Additional comments or thoughts?

Appendix 2



JOYFUL TOOLKIT | JOY JOURNAL

From the book *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things
to Create Extraordinary Happiness* by Ingrid Fetell Lee

JOY JOURNAL

As you go about your daily life this week, keep a Joy Journal. Use it to take note of any time you feel a sense of joy. Pay attention to moments when you smile or laugh, when you're tempted to say "Yay!" or "Wow," or even just when you become aware of a subtle, pleasant feeling. You can also include any joyful memories that come to mind. For each moment, write down:

- * Where you are.
- * Whom you are with.
- * What you are doing.
- * What sights, sounds, aromas, textures,
or flavors are associated with your joy

At the end of the week, look for patterns. You can note your patterns in the *Joyfinding* worksheet.



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